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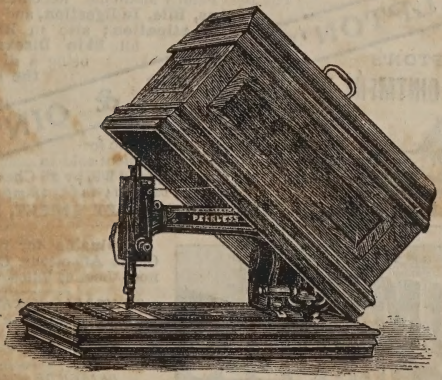

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AUTHOR OF "A WINGLESS ANGEL," "FROM THE BOSOM OF THE DEEP," "STORMLIGHT," "STORIES WEIRD AND WONDERFUL," ETC.

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THE DEAD MAN'S SECRET.

INTRODUCTION.

In that most nautical of London suburbs, Wapping, the very air of which is heavy with the odour of tar and shipping, a block of very old houses was pulled down a few years ago. There was nothing very extraordinary in this proceeding, for the hand of modern progress is ruthless, and in the rage for improvements it seizes and tears to the ground ancient buildings and historic monuments alike. It is true there was nothing about these houses to attract attention save their great age, which was said to be at least four hundred years. Therefore, as a link with the past they were interesting, although they had been modernized almost out of entire semblance to their former selves.

In razing a main wall, however, of one of the houses, a cupboard, built into the thickness of the wall, was brought to light. It was only an ordinary

cupboard, but its presence must have been unsuspected for many years, as the door had been covered with successive layers of paper that had been put on the walls of the room. But what was remarkable was this, in the cupboard was a trunk, such as was common a century ago—one of those trunks that were covered with bull's hide, and studded all round the edges with brass nails. This particular trunk was worm-eaten and mildewed, and the hair of the hide had fallen away in patches, as if the long-hidden box was afflicted with mange. On the lid being raised, the trunk was found to be almost full of manuscripts, time-stained and yellow. Some of these papers were tied up in rolls with strips of ribbon or pieces of string. Others, again, were lying scattered about. As the papers seemed to be of no value to those who made a cursory examination of them, they were flung, with the old trunk, on to the heap of *débris* of bricks and mortar, and it was my good fortune to rescue them from that position. A hasty glance led me to the conclusion that the papers were deeply interesting, and I resolved to go through them carefully. The writing was not good, and in places was so obliterated with the damp as to be utterly indecipherable. I was enabled, however, to gather, that the whole of the sheets were a somewhat

rambling narrative of strange adventures experienced by one Hans Christian Feldje. This narrative struck me as having been written by a man of intelligence and keen observation, although lacking in scholastic attainments, for he did not spell well, he seemed to have a soul above grammar, and a not altogether complete grasp of the English language. Apart from his name, therefore, it was evident the writer was a foreigner.

When I had carefully waded through the manuscript, and with much difficulty had collated the various sheets in proper sequence—for, by some strange oversight, the writer had neglected to number his folios—I found that I had the material to hand for a stirring and remarkable story. I have allowed the author to speak in his own person, though, of course, I have been compelled to alter his language very considerably. The title was suggested by certain phrases used by Mr. Feldje himself; and it seems to me in every way appropriate. I should like to say, in conclusion, that in perusing Feldje's sheets I have been greatly struck by the air of truth that pervades them. He writes like a man who was telling a plain, unvarnished tale in homely language; neither sparing himself when blame was due, nor hesitating to accord praise where he felt he was entitled to it.

THE STORY, AS TOLD BY HANS CHRISTIAN FELDJE, MATE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC.

I'm going to make a true story of the startling experiences of part of my life. I'm not good with the pen, for I am a sailor man, and know more about boxing the compass and sailing a ship than I do about writing. But if I put it in the rough, I can get it polished up afterwards by one of them writing fellows that make books. I'm told that these chaps, if they only get hold of half a word that suits them, will reel off a yarn as quickly as a log line runs out when a craft is spanking along at the rate of fourteen knots an hour; and that for a five-pound note, a bottle of old Jamaica, and a quid of 'bacca they'll write any mortal thing. Now, that's my market! and as I ain't a bargain driver, but just as free with

my money as ever a sailor man was, I'll give any one of them skunks as does the writing two fivers and as much rum and 'bacca as will last him for six months, if he ain't too heavy on them. I consider that's a fair deal. And then as for the yarn, why, Lord love you, this here of mine will just put into the shade everything that has ever been written, if the fellow what writes it ain't one of those swabs that can't tell a holy-stone from the family Bible. But avast there, mate. Heave in your slack. Why, darn me, if I don't think after all I can do without the assistance of the writing chaps. Anyway, here goes.*

* This is in the original manuscript. I have allowed it to stand exactly as written, as showing Mr. Feldje's rugged honesty of expression. It would appear as if the author had not succeeded during his lifetime in getting hold of one of "the writing chaps" he so feelingly refers to, notwithstanding the liberality of his terms, namely, "two fivers and as much rum and 'bacca as would last him for six months." The payment in kind suggests itself to me as being more munificent than the two fivers, though, of course, much would depend upon the "writing chap's" capacity for consuming tobacco and stowing rum away. If he had not a sailor's stomach he might very soon find himself overloaded, and turn the turtle. Why Mr. Feldje did not succeed in getting his narrative published during his lifetime I do not know, but it would seem as if he had put his papers into the box, and stowed the box away into the cupboard, where it lay hidden for many, many years. He had evidently forgotten all about it. Possibly he found his task of writing his life so exhausting that he endeavoured to recuperate himself with rum and 'bacca, and the remedy killed him. This, however, is a mere suggestion. I tried to learn something of his domestic life, but failed, though I ascertained that in the house where the box

My name is Hans Christian Feldje. I am a Swede by birth, but left my native country when I was very young. My people on my father's side had been sailors for many generations, so salt water ran in my blood. My father met with an accident while on shipboard that came very near sending him to Davy Jones's locker. However, he recovered, but he was so crippled that he was unable to go to sea again, so he and my mother, with my two brothers and my sister, came to London; and as he had saved a little money, he opened a sailors' boarding-house in Poplar, not far from the East India Docks.

At this time I was a small bit of a swab, about eight years of age, and I had to lend a hand in waiting on the lodgers. I didn't get much schooling, as you may imagine, but I soon picked up English. I also learnt to read, with the assistance of a neighbour, and got very fond of books, especially those about the sea and adventures. As soon as I could read I went ahead a bit, because I did not want to be a dunce all my life, and by the time I was about eleven we had an old skipper come to lodge with us. He was a weather-beaten old hulk, but could carry a

was found, a Mr. Hans Christian Feldje died at the age of seventy-three—so, after all, the rum and 'bacca must have suited his constitution—and was buried in the parish churchyard of St. George's-in-the-East.

big cargo of rum. He had sailed the salt seas the world over, and could spin yarns from one Saturday night to the next Saturday night without stopping. He was a fellow who had had lots of schooling and knew everything, and he undertook to teach me on consideration of my father letting him lodge at a cheaper rate.

Well, for two years he pegged away, and he not only taught me a lot of navigation amongst other things, but he inflamed my mind with notions about the sea. At last the old fellow, having got too big a cargo of grog aboard, broached-to, and went down in deep water. That is, he had a fit of apoplexy after a week's spree, and was found dead in his bed.

He was my first and last schoolmaster; but, nevertheless, I have managed to pick up a good deal, and though perhaps I'm not as good a scholar as those swells who go to colleges, I know how many beans make five, and can tell a hawk from a hand-saw.

By the time I was twelve I began to worry my father to let me go to sea. He wanted to keep me at home, however, because I had become very useful in the boarding-house, and owing to his crippled state he had some difficulty in getting about. But the salt was in my veins, and though I was very young, I felt that a 'long-shore life wouldn't suit me. At last I

told the old man that if he didn't give me my sailing orders, I should up anchor some dark night and run the blockade. That fetched him, and when I was thirteen he bound me 'prentice to a Dutch East Indiaman trading under the British flag. As I have said, I was only thirteen, but I looked three years older at least. I was a well-built youngster; smart and able, and quick at picking up things. I had a stomach like an ostrich, and as I had not been brought up in cotton wool, I was pretty well toughened, and could stand any amount of knocking about.

In those days a youngster on board of an Indiaman had a pretty lively time of it. Apprentices were not addressed as "sir," and they didn't wear blue reefers with brass buttons; and caps with gold bands and flags on them. Oh dear, no. They were called lubbers and swabs and greasers, with a lot of epithets before these names, just to give them tone like; and they were generally roused out of their bunks with a rope's end or a handspike. They had to live on hard tack and salt horse, and, as there were no steam-condensers aboard in those days, Jack often had to wash his maggotty grub down with stinking water. Nor had the apprentice much time allowed him for saying his prayers, or for doing anything but his duty, and that had no end. If he ventured at any time to

be obstreperous, he was mast-headed for a few hours, or triced up to the mizzen rigging, and the posterior part of his anatomy tickled with the end of a rope.

However, there was a good deal of attractiveness about a sea life even under these conditions, and a lad who wasn't a fool got on well. Anyway, in those days they didn't make cotton-wool sailors as they do now; and 'prentice hands were turned into cast-iron men, who could go anywhere and do anything, and could handle a full-rigged Indiaman as easily as a yacht.

When I was out of my time I shipped as an A.B. on board the *Dunkerley*, bound for Batavia; and in that voyage I was cast away with the rest of the crew—except five or six who were drowned—on a desert island, and for six months we lived on nothing in particular, and didn't wax fat on it.

If I were to tell my experiences for the next twenty years I guess I could make a pretty interesting book. I was twice shipwrecked during that time, and for a whole year I lived amongst the cannibals on one of the Solomon group in the Pacific. But that is not my purpose. I intend to only deal with that part of my life at which the strange adventures began that I am now about to relate.

I was getting on for forty at this time, and had

gone out to Monte Video from Liverpool as mate of a barque called the *Ariadne*. I fell sick at Monte Video through drinking poisoned water, and had to be left behind at the hospital. I remained there for several months. The weather was just about as hot as it could be outside of the infernal regions, and the sickness was awful. I was therefore very anxious to clear out, although there didn't seem to be much chance, notwithstanding that I was willing to ship before the mast. But all things come to him who waits, and my chance came at last.

One day a large full-rigged ship called the *Golden Cloud*, and hailing from Bristol, arrived with a cargo of horses. She had been knocking about the coast for some time, having come down from Pernambuco, and as she had a good deal of sickness on board, she had lost several hands, including the mate. She was commanded by a countryman of mine, a Swede named Yngvar Nielson, and he at once shipped me as mate in place of the one he had lost. We lay at Monte Video for another two months, as there were no freights. But at last the skipper took a charter from a Spanish firm at Buenos Ayres for Callao and San Blas, on the coast of Mexico, and having loaded our cargo we cleared out, and I was very thankful to see the last of the Rio.

I did not form a very high opinion of the skipper. He was over-fond of his grog, and it made him mad, and when he got into his tantrums you had to stand by for squalls. A good deal of the navigation of the vessel devolved on me, for often the skipper was incapable of taking a sight or working a reckoning. We had a pleasant run south, however. We kept well into the land, and passed to the westward of the Falkland Islands, but off the Horn we got a snifter, and for six days we were hove to, and for another six we were scudding under bare poles. The vessel was not very well found, and she was undermanned, so that at times we found ourselves at the mercy of wind and waves. The sea was full of ice, too, and it took us all our time to keep clear of it.

The crew and I worked well together. They said they had every confidence in me, and they so disliked the old man that I believe if I had told them to pitch him overboard they would have done so. But I had no desire for his death, though I was so uncomfortable in the vessel that I resolved to clear out as soon as possible.

At last we rounded the Horn, and bore up north, and, as we had fallen short of provisions, we put into Valparaiso for fresh supplies. Here three or four of the hands deserted us, and we had to ship fresh

ones, including a boatswain, an Englishman, named Robert Nixon. He was a man about fifty years of age; a regular old shellback. He was a thorough sailor man from the tips of the grizzly hair on his head to the soles of his huge feet. Like myself, he had sailed pretty nigh all over the world, and I took to him from the first. He was a quiet man, who knew his work, and did it well. He could take his "tot" of rum with any one, but he never shirked his duty, and that's one of the things that drew me to him. I don't believe in your fresh-water sailors, who don't know a clew-line from a marling-spike, and yet swagger about a ship as if they had been in command of three-deckers all their lives. Bob Nixon wasn't one of that school. There was no swagger in him, but there was nothing about a ship from the main-royal truck to the keelson that he didn't know.

The carpenter was a Scotchman, named Sandy Macpherson, another good fellow, who seemed capable of doing almost anything; and he and I and the boatswain soon became pals.

After leaving Valparaiso we fell in with strong westerly gales that compelled us to give the coast a wide berth, and, as the *Golden Cloud* was a regular old washing-tub, we made a long passage to Callao. Here more of the hands deserted, and we had to

ship fresh ones, including a carpenter's mate. We were a fortnight in Callao before we could clear for San Blas. We shaped a nor'-westerly course at first on leaving, hoping to get the fag-end of the south-east trades to carry us down into the Doldrums; but the wind soon fell light, and we hugged the land again, so as to get the night breezes that blew down from the Andes. We managed to drift into about 3° south, where we fell in with nothing but calms. The heat was a caution. The pitch bubbled up out of the seams of the deck, and the brasswork got so hot that it would almost take the skin off your hands if you touched it.

It was pretty monotonous work this, lying like a log on a sea of oil. A long, rolling swell came up from the south, causing the water to flash like a mirror of highly polished steel in the fierce glare of the sunlight. With the exception of the motion imparted to them by the rolling of the vessel owing to the swell, our sails clung about the masts as limp as wet rags. The skipper whistled for wind, and swore from morning till night, except when he was drinking rum; but no wind came, and the inactivity under the roasting sun was maddening. The oily sea was dotted with the black fins of the sharks, and from the time the sun rose to the time it set in

the red-hot ocean there was never a cloud in the sky to break its fierceness. As the ship swarmed with cockroaches, and mosquitos came off the land in tens of thousands, while the heat above and below was so stifling as to render it difficult for even us shellbacks to sleep, it may be imagined that we were not quite as comfortable as we might have been in a king's palace. I don't know that I ever felt so tired of a voyage before in all my life, and the discomfort was rendered the more unpleasant owing to the tyranny of the skipper, who really seemed to do all that he could to render the lives of his crew miserable. I am quite sure that if the hands could have reached the shore, they would have left him in a body, for one and all vowed that the *Golden Cloud* was the worst ship they had ever sailed in.

One day, when in lat. 2° 3′ south, with Guayaquil bearing east twenty-five miles, one of the hands was in the foretop, putting chafing-gear on the collar of the fore-stay, when he reported a large black something on the water about five miles off on our starboard quarter. It did not look like a boat, and he could not make out what it was. Taking a glass with me, I went up to the main cross-trees, and after a time I made out the strange object to be a raft, with a man on it. Although the distance was not

great for a good glass, the glare and flash of the water and the haze in the atmosphere produced such a mirage that it was difficult to see objects clearly. However, I was convinced that what I saw was a raft, with a man lying down on it, and suspecting that he must be a shipwrecked mariner, I went to the skipper's cabin to report the circumstance.

CHAPTER II.

THE RAFT AND ITS OCCUPANT.

The skipper, who had been fuddling himself during the morning, had turned in, and when I roused him up he growled like an angry bear. I told him that there was a raft with a man on it a few miles away, and I asked him what I should do.

"Let the raft and the man go to the devil," he roared.

"Well, sir," I answered, "as the poor fellow may be a shipwrecked mariner, it would hardly be human to refuse to render him assistance. Perhaps we may be wrecked ourselves some day and want help."

"True, true, Feldje," he muttered, as if his feelings had been touched by that last remark. "Well, look here, give me a drink of rum, for my throat is like a red-hot copper-kettle. This infernally sultry weather burns the inside out of me. When I've had a drink, I'll go on deck and see what the raft is like."

I thought to myself, "It isn't the hot weather that's burning your inside out, old man, but the rum." However, I gave him a tot out of the little beaker that always stood on his cabin table; and then with his bare feet and only his trousers and shirt on, and his hair hanging about his face like a towzled mop, he went on deck. It was a long time before he could make the raft out, but at last he did so, and then turning to me he said—

"Feldje, get a boat lowered, and send the second mate and some of the hands to see what that thing is; and look here, take a bottle of rum with you, for the poor devil on the raft may want something. It's impossible to live in this blazing weather without rum."

I smiled, and went away to execute his orders, when, calling me back, he added—

"Look here, go in the boat yourself, and take who you like to pull the oars."

I was glad of this, for even the little change of a few miles' pull in a boat would be a break in the monotony; and as the boatswain was standing by, I told him he could go with me, and I sang out to "Chips" to go too, thinking that he might be able to pick out a spar or two from the raft, for, as far as I could make out, the raft consisted of spars lashed together.

Besides the boatswain and Chips I selected two A.B.'s to go in the boat. One was an Irishman, a great favourite of mine. His name was Barney Fagan, a clever seaman, and a generally useful fellow. The other was an Englishman, named Jim Smith.

We had no difficulty in getting the boat into the water, for our vessel rolled steadily, and at intervals, as she rose and fell with the swell. As soon as we had unhooked the falls, I told the men to bend to it, and they soon swept us clear of the ship. The glare from the water was blinding, and the heat was suffocating. I had got a bottle of rum from the steward, according to the captain's orders, and thinking that my men might want supporting before we got back, after a long pull over that burning sea, I had secretly brought a second bottle from my own locker; and as we had plenty of tobacco, we lit our pipes and made ourselves comfortable.

It was a peculiar sensation as we rose on the back of the great swell, and then dropped down in the valley, which was blinding white with the gleam and glare. The sharks swarmed about us, and now and again, as they thrust their black fins out of the water, we could see their villainous-looking eyes glaring hungrily at us. We had a boat-hook with us, and I

managed to give one huge brute such a prod with it that his blood spurted from the wound, and the blow must have stunned him, for in a few minutes we saw scores of his companions tearing him to pieces, and at the sight Barney Fagan exclaimed piously—

"Howly Mother be praised that there will be one of thim bastes less in the sea anyway!"

When we had pulled about two and a half or three miles, the men were nearly all dead-beat with the exertion in the furnace-like heat, and so I served out a tot of rum, mixed with water, of which a small beaker was stowed in the boat.

Before leaving the vessel I had taken the bearings of the raft, but neglected to bring a small hand-compass with me, which was unfortunate, for we could not see the object we were rowing to; in fact, I began at last to think that we must have got out of our course, and I strained my eyes anxiously over the sea in search of the raft, but could see nothing save the gleaming waste of waters, dotted about with the fins of the sea-tigers that were athirst for prey. Presently the boatswain stood up, and, after a long and steady gaze ahead, he exclaimed—

"I believe I see it there, about a point and a half on our weather-bow."

Standing on the thwart, I caught sight of what

seemed a black speck that rose and fell with the swell. I brought the boat's head up, and we steered direct for the object. The work of rowing under the torrid conditions was very trying, and I served out another tot, which stimulated the men to fresh exertions.

"Well," said Chips, as he stopped rowing, and mopped his streaming face, "if that poor devil has been on the raft long he must be done brown by this time, and be stewing in his own juice."

We laughed at this remark, but suddenly I caught full sight of the raft as we rose to the swell, and as we were not more than half a mile from it, I could see that there was one man on it, and he was stretched on his back, so I said gravely—

"Chips, I think you are right. The poor fellow is done brown, for I believe he's dead."

"Maybe it's only his watch below, and he's slaping," put in Barney.

"I fear, Barney," said I, "he'll get no more watches below, for he's gone aloft."

"Divil a fear, sir," exclaimed Barney. "Sailor men never go up there," and he pointed to the sky. "They always remain down below," and he pointed to the water.

"No, Barney," I said reprovingly, "sailor men are not half as bad as a good many other kind of folk,

and though I don't profess to know much about it, my impression is there is a regular place for sailors."

"Well, I don't mind where it is," chimed in the boatswain, "if they'll only give us plenty of rum and 'bacca."

I did not make any answer to that, for at that moment we came in full sight of the raft again; but I could not help thinking that, as a rule, a sailor's idea of heaven is a place where there is an unlimited supply of tobacco and rum.

We were now close to the raft, and a few vigorous strokes of the oars put us alongside, and then the sight we saw made us silent for some moments. The raft was roughly, but ingeniously constructed. It was built partly of young trees and casks, and was fastened together by a peculiarly tough fibre of some sort of bark. It was evident to us that such a raft had not been made on board of a vessel, and must therefore have been put together on shore, and launched; but why? That was certainly a mystery!

Its sole occupant, who was stretched on his back, with one leg drawn up, was not only quite dead, but must have been dead for some days, for he was rotting under that fierce sun, and all round the raft were literally scores of ravenous sharks, and every now and

then they snapped at the raft in their eagerness for the prey. It was impossible then to tell what the man's nationality was. His face had been burnt almost black with exposure to tropical sun. His hair and moustache and beard were very dark, and at first sight he seemed not unlike a Spaniard. He wore a pair of sea-boots, duck trousers, fastened at the waist by a broad belt, and a flannel shirt that had once been blue, but was now bleached very nearly white. His hands were clenched, as if he had died in agony, as in fact he had, for his lower lip was bitten through, the teeth remaining in the wound; and his face wore an expression of fixed, stony horror. He had evidently been a seaman, for there was tattooed on his breast a full-rigged ship, and his arms were also tattooed all over with men and women, ships and animals, and on the broad part of the left arm was this somewhat novel device—

We rough sailors were moved as we read that, for it might have been his wife, or his sweetheart, or a child that he asked God to love, and we all had a soft place in our hearts for the girls we had left behind us. The device also led us at once to the inference that the dead man was an Englishman, because a foreigner would hardly have such a thing tattooed on him. At any rate, the words would not have been in English.

The raft contained, besides a flag-pole made of a young sapling, with a ragged old shirt doing duty as a flag, two boxes, one a square one, and a long sort of case. There was also a cask, which we could see held provisions, for it had so warped in the great heat that the spaces between the staves were open, and the top hoops had slipped down to the bottom.

We had taken in all that I have described, without going on to the raft; for the dead man wasn't a pleasant sight, nor was the smell that came from him nice. But lying parallel with the body was a musket, and I felt sure if there was a musket there must be ammunition, and as I longed to put a bullet into one or two of the cursed sharks that were tumbling over each other in their eagerness to seize us, I told the men to keep the boat steady alongside, and as soon

as that was done I stepped out and picked the musket up. The barrel was so hot that I had to let it drop again. But then I lifted it up by the stock and dipped it into the sea to cool it. Raising the lid of the long case, I found two more muskets, together with four formidable Spanish knives, and a quantity of ammunition. I at once loaded the three guns, and giving one to the boatswain and one to Chips, we blazed away at a shark that was on the surface, and our bullets went into him, for he rolled over and over, and the sea was dyed with his blood, while the others began to tear his flesh to pieces.

That little excitement over, and as we were relieved of the presence of the sharks for a short time while they fought for the flesh of the dead one, I turned my attention again to the raft and its occupant. He was a youngish man, and had certainly been a big, powerful fellow. It was evident that he could not have died of hunger or thirst, for I have already mentioned the cask of provisions, and there was also a cask of sweet water, though it was foul now.

I had not yet examined the square chest of which I have spoken. I found it was locked; and though no doubt the key was in the dead man's pocket I could not just then bring myself to touch him. In coming away from the ship, I had in the hurry slipped

on a pair of heavy sea boots, and giving a few vigorous kicks to the lock, it soon yielded, and as I lifted the lid and saw the contents of the box I fell upon my knees, and in my excitement cried out—

"Good God! what is this?"

CHAPTER III.

THE STRANGE MANUSCRIPT.

The exclamation that I uttered was one that any man in my circumstances would have uttered, for that chest was nearly full of what seemed to me to be pieces of solid gold. Astonishing as that discovery was, however, there was something that astonished me still more, and caused me for a moment to start back with a sense of horror that the unaccustomed sight of so much gold could not counteract. And no wonder that I was horrified, for on the top of the gold was a man's head. It had all the appearance of the head of a mummy, for it was perfectly brown, and the flesh had shrunk away, leaving the skin cleaving to the bones. The shrivelled lips were drawn apart, revealing a set of even teeth that were yellow and discoloured, much the same as sailors' are who indulge in the habit of tobacco-chewing. It was impossible to tell the hue of the eyes, for they had

withered and sunk down into the skull, but the moustache and beard and hair of the head were dark.

I did not, of course, note the whole of the foregoing particulars at once, for it was some minutes before I could overcome the repugnance the thing begot in me. As it was only natural they should be, my shipmates were curious to know what it was that had excited me, and they stood up in the boat trying to get a glimpse of the contents of the chest, but the position they were in prevented this.

"What's wrang wi' you, man?" asked Chips. "If you had seen a ghaist you couldna look mair scared."

"Well, it's not exactly a ghost, Chips," I answered, "but there's a man's head in that box."

"A man's head!" exclaimed my mates in chorus, and with an adroit spring, Nixon, the boatswain, leapt from the boat on to the raft, and approached the chest; and then he drew back, as I had done, with a cry of horror.

By this time I had recovered from the first shock of surprise, and said—

"Boys, there's something queer about this business, and I'm blowed if I think we shall get to the bottom of it. This dead man cannot give us any information, and that head there on the top of the gold is not likely to tell us where the gold came from, nor the

reason that he is floating about in the Pacific Ocean without his body."

At the word gold, the rest of the men scrambled out of the boat on to the raft, and for a few moments the sight of the gold seemed to turn them mad, and, falling down on their knees, they thrust their hands into the chest, notwithstanding the head, and with greedy, savage clutch gathered up handfuls of the precious metal.

"Shame on you, mates!" I cried angrily. "Get up out of that, and don't act like lunatics."

My words restored them, and the frenzy passed away as suddenly as it came. Then for the first time I noticed on the top of the chest a roll of paper, and, thinking this might afford a clue to the mystery, I snatched it up, and quickly opened it out. It consisted of two or three sheets of white foolscap. They were dirty and stained, but on one of the sheets, written in a neat hand, with a black-lead pencil, was the following:—

"They are all dead, all of them. How strange is fate! I alone survive, and I shall live. I must live, for I have dreamed of wealth all my life, and now that it has come to me it would be hard to die. If I can but get clear with what I have already secured, I will fit out a brig, and come back to carry away

shiploads of the precious metal. Great Heavens! what a prospect! Shiploads of it. It will make me a god on earth. I shall sit on a golden throne, and men will fall down at my feet and worship me. That will repay me for all I have suffered, and yet—and yet, will it be? I sometimes think my brain is giving way, and I feel ill, as if I were dying. This solitude is awful, and I think I would give half my gold if I could only have a companion to talk to. For this burning sun and glittering sea are maddening. Oh, for the sight of a sail! Surely some ship must pass soon, and rescue me."

There was evidently a break here, and there had been an interval before the writing was resumed. What followed was written with a less steady hand, and it was plain as a pike-staff that the writer at the time he wrote was wandering a little in his head, for this is what I read—

"Gold! It is the only thing worth living for. There is a strange haze on the sea, and the sun is blood red. What does it mean? It's all mine—all mine. Gold! Men would sell their souls for what I've got. It's strange how that haze thickens. The Lord pity me! what is this? Am I going mad, or is this really Mary coming to me over the oily sea?"

Here occurred another break, and from the fore-

going it was not difficult to understand that the writer was ill, and that his brain was giving way. When next he took up his pencil, this is what he produced :—

"I am ill, and yet I cannot believe I am going to die. No, no; I shall come back, for have I not left tons of gold? Tons! tons! tons! Heavens! the very thought of it seems to bewilder me. But let me see. What was it I was going to write? Ah, I remember. Some memoranda so as to keep all the details in my own mind. You land at the pillars near the Bear's Head. South half a furlong. North to Quito. East and by south. Cross the Ica, Cotopaxi bearing due west. A furlong north. Strike Coqueta, following south and east. At the fork, towards the rising sun——"

There was a sudden stoppage at this point. But lower down the page was this line; it was so badly written as to be almost indecipherable, for the writer's hand was obviously weak and his eyes dazed—

"The Lord in heaven pity me. Will succour never come? At the fork, towards the rising sun. Gold! Gold! El Dorado! I'll sleep, for the night comes, and my secret is safe in my own breast, The morrow will bring me release."

I read these last words with a certain rising in my throat, for could any one doubt that the poor fellow

was dying rapidly when he wrote, "I'll sleep, for the night comes"? Probably he had lain down on his raft then—a lonely man on a lonely ocean—and when next the tropical sun rose over the gleaming waters he had indeed been released.

I will honestly confess, however, that my emotion soon passed away, for sailor men, as a rule, are not much given to indulging in sentiment. Moreover, there was within my reach a chest that apparently contained gold to the value of many thousands of pounds, and at once I began to dream of luxury and wealth; even, no doubt, as the poor devil had done who was then lying dead at my feet.

I had at first hurriedly glanced over the writing, and then had read it aloud to my mates, and when I finished a momentary solemn silence fell upon us. It was broken at last by Nixon asking—

"What does El Dorado mean?"

I happened to know the meaning of it, so I answered—

"It is a Spanish word, and means a land of unbounded wealth."

"Ma conscience!" cried Sandy Macpherson, lifting up his hands in amazement. "My name's no Sandy, if I wouldna gang tae the end o' the warld tae find a land o' that kind. Man, think o' it. A land o'

unbounded wealth. The vera thocht o' it just mak's my mouth water."

"Mother of Moses!" suddenly roared out Barney Fagan, "it's not the land of wealth, but the bottom of the sea we'll be going to, for divil a boat have we got now."

To our consternation, we found that the boat had drifted away, as in their excitement the boys had forgotten to secure the painter when they jumped aboard the raft. It was, of course, a lubberly oversight, but it could be pardoned under the circumstances. We were in a predicament, however, for we could not get back to the ship without the boat, and there were no means of propelling the raft; for though there were places for oars, the oars were absent, and had probably dropped overboard after the man's death.

"Well, this is a pretty go," I said. "What the deuce are we to do now?"

"One of us will have to swim out and bring the boat back," said Jim Smith, quietly, speaking for the first time.

"Who do you think will trust himself in that sea with all those sharks about?" asked Nixon.

"I will," answered Jim, coolly, and taking off his boots. he pulled his jack-knife from its sheath, placed

it between his teeth, and plunged into the treacherous waters before we could stop him. I confess that I held my breath in sheer amazement at his audacity and foolhardiness; but, recognizing the peril that beset him, and admiring his pluck, I snatched up one of the guns, loaded it, and watched him with palpitating heart, expecting every moment to see him disappear, dragged beneath the surface by those curses of the sea —the sharks. My mates had also picked up the two other guns and loaded them, and stood on the watch, not that we could have saved our shipmate had he been seized, but there was some satisfaction in knowing that we held in our hands the means of killing one of the ravenous brutes if he ventured to show his ugly body above the water.

We suffered many minutes of intense suspense and anxiety as we watched with strained eyes Jim Smith swim the hundred yards or so that intervened between the raft and the boat, and it was with a sigh of relief we saw him reach the boat and scramble into it; and by a common impulse of admiration for his daring we set up a cheer, forgetting for the moment the box of gold and the ghastly head and the dead man at our feet.

It did not take Smith long to pull back to the raft, and when he reached it we took good care to secure

the boat. And now that the little excitement of the boat incident was over, we were enabled to turn our attention once more to the raft and its silent passenger. As I contemplated him lying there and fast mouldering to decay under that blazing sun, and then thought of the chest of gold, I felt that there was some mystery that was worth solving. Who this man was did not so much concern me then as where he had come from. He had been in the prime of life when he died, and was a handsome man to boot. It was clear, too, that, though a sailor, he had occupied a position much superior to a man before the mast, and his writing and composition testified that he was a man of education. I should have been worse than obtuse if I had failed to gather from his manuscript that his references to the points of the compass were directions for reaching the region from whence he had brought that gold, a region which he himself spoke of as "El Dorado." The reason of the head being in the chest—curious as I was about it—I could not surmise, and made no attempt to construct a theory; but having now grown familiar with the fearful object, I lifted it up by the hair, and I noted then that the neck had not been severed evenly, but was jagged in places, as if the operator had found a difficulty in doing his work.

I laid the head down on the raft, and my shipmates drew away from it, for it was not a pleasant sight. Then, kneeling by the chest, I more critically examined its contents. I found that the pieces were not, as I at first thought they were, solid gold, but gold quartz, of such richness, however, that there was well nigh as much gold as stone. Without any pretence to even an approximate estimate of the value of the precious metal, I felt perfectly sure it represented many thousands of pounds, and it was strongly probable that where that had come from there were tens of thousands—possibly hundreds of thousands of pounds—still waiting to be dug out of the earth, for had not the dead man in his written memoranda spoken of El Dorado?

"Boys," I said, turning to my shipmates, "this is a strange find, and there is more gold here than we could earn as seamen, even if we were to live another hundred years."

"Ay, ay," they answered in chorus, "that's true." And then, as if by some tacit understanding, Robert Nixon, the boatswain, spoke up as spokesman for the rest—

"Look here, mates," he said in his deep, gruff voice, that seemed to have something of the ocean's roar in it. "We sailor men have as much right to

some of the world's riches as any one else. The things on this here raft are flotsam, and if we give them up, how much shall we get for our share?"

"Faix, not as much as would allow us a tot of grog every day for the rest of our lives," answered Barney Fagan.

I caught the meaning of these remarks, and the men's faces indicated what was passing in their minds. I turned my eyes to the ship. She was almost hull down, her mainyard backed, and her sails hanging limp. No land was in sight, save to the nor'ard of us, where a small island, thick with tropical vegetation, seemed to float on the calm sea. It seemed to me, as I caught sight of that chest of gold, as if Providence itself had thrust it in our way. It is said that men make their own fate, and at that moment I could not help thinking that we sailors, floating on that raft in the open Pacific, had our future in our hands, and that future held unlimited wealth for us; and being a man of action, and quick to arrive at decisions in emergencies, I at once made up my mind what course to pursue. That course was to endeavour, even at the risk of my life, to learn the dead man's secret.

CHAPTER IV.

WE DECIDE TO DESERT.

"SHIPMATES," said I, "this dead man must have come from a place where there are waggon-loads of gold. He calls it El Dorado. What do you say? Shall we go in search of it?"

The answer I got was a hearty and emphatic "Ay, ay, we'll go."

I was aware, of course, that it was a serious matter to desert a ship on the open sea in that way, but how many men are there who would have allowed that consideration to stand between them and unbounded wealth? If there are such saints, it's certain I don't belong to them. My life on board the *Golden Cloud* hadn't been that smooth and pleasurable that I was enchanted with it. The promise, too, of adventure stirred my pulses, and accorded well with my disposition. I had ever been fond of adventure, and here a remarkable opportunity had suddenly occurred

for following the bent of my inclinations to the fullest. The El Dorado the dead man had written about could not be a fabled land, for the chest of gold was a reality, and where that gold had come from there must be more. My knowledge of that part of the world was very limited. I knew that we were off the wild coast of Ecuador, and that the interior was an almost unexplored country of great mountains and lonely valleys—a country of mystery—filled, as I had casually heard, with a fabulous wealth of minerals. There my knowledge ended, except that I was further aware that, by keeping a due east course, one could reach that wonderful region of the Amazonas in Northern Brazil, through which flows the mighty Amazon. Such was the extent of my geographical knowledge, but it was sufficient to fire me with a desire for exploration, while the dead man on the raft, eloquent in his stony dumbness, seemed to appeal to me to try and learn the secret that was for ever locked in his own cold brain.

And now Nixon spoke again. He was an intelligent and thoughtful man, and his utterances always seemed to be the result of a clear grasp of his subject, whatever it might be.

"Mr. Feldje," he said, "of course we are doing wrong, according to law, in deserting the ship; but

after all it's not a very great crime, and an opportunity of this kind only comes once in one's lifetime. Let such an opportunity slip, and we must drudge on and slave to the end of our days. For what? For a pittance that just keeps body and soul together. Let us go in search of the place where all this gold has come from. We shall carry our lives in our hands; but what of that? We do that whenever we sail the salt seas. Maybe our bones will bleach in yonder strange country; but what of that, I ask again? As well bleach there as in Davy Jones's locker. I propose, sir, that we make you our leader, and that we faithfully hang together while there is a drop of blood in our veins."

"Ay, ay," exclaimed the others, and each man thrust forth his horny and tar-stained hand, grasping mine with great heartiness in token of their entire assent to the proposal that I should be their leader. I was much touched by this proof of their sincerity and friendship, for I had always striven, ever since I had been a sailor, to earn the goodwill of my shipmates, and it was very gratifying to me in a moment like this to know that I had the esteem and trust of these men.

"Weel," chimed in Chips, "I think we understan' each other th' noo, and the first thing is to heave

thae things overboard, and then make for the land before nightfall."

By "thae things" he meant the head and the dead man; but I answered, and said—

"No, mates, we won't heave them overboard for the cursed sharks to feed on, but we'll carry them ashore and give them Christian burial."

This proposition met with the entire and hearty approval of the others. We then held a consultation whether we should tranship the things from the raft —including the *dead things*—to the boat, or take the raft in tow, and we decided to do the latter, although it would be a tough job towing that unwieldy craft, especially as we noted that there was a strong current setting away from the shore. It was clear, however, that the raft's cargo would have overweighted the ship's dingy, which was only a four-oared boat, to say nothing of our being so near the dead 'un, and so we faced the task we had set ourselves cheerfully. At this moment, as I turned my eyes seaward, I fancied I saw that our vessel was flying signals. I had brought a glass with me, and I was enabled to make out, although the signals hung very limp, that we were to go back before the night breeze rose; and I thought to myself, "If the skipper waits there till we join him again, he will have a mighty long wait."

"Now, boys," said I, "let us make for the land."

We all got into the boat, and each of my mates took an oar, and occasionally I relieved one or other of them, for it was tough work, and the heat was a caution.

We saw the fiery sun dip below the horizon, and almost fancied we heard the hissing of the water as the burning orb sank. Then, as soon as the sun had gone, the darkness gathered over the great ocean, for there is no twilight in these tropical regions. From the land a breeze commenced to blow, freshening in the course of an hour or so, and making our work doubly hard. But still we pulled on, for we knew that if we stopped, the wind beating on the unwieldy raft would speedily carry us far out to sea again.

Towards midnight, to our astonishment, we suddenly heard the cry of sailors trimming sails, and straining our eyes, we made out a vessel in the darkness, and from her rig and build we knew it was the *Golden Cloud*, and guessed that the skipper was cruising about in search of us. We, therefore, lay on our oars and kept dead silence, and we saw the vessel sweep by us like a phantom ship and disappear in the darkness.

"Now, boys, bend to your oars," I whispered, "for we've lost ground, and must make it up."

I had no accurate idea how far we were from the land, though when I had taken the sights on board the *Golden Cloud* the morning I left her, I found in working out the sights that the nearest land was Point St. Helena, near Guayaquil. It bore due east about fifty miles. Since then we had drifted about a good deal, but it struck me that we could not be far from the mouth of the Gulf of Guayaquil, at the entrance of which is Puna Island, and I was in strong hopes when the daylight broke that we should see the land, and I steered as near as I could judge direct for the gulf. So exhausting was the heavy pulling, that we agreed that while two pulled the others should have a couple of hours' watch below. Of course, by this arrangement we did not make so much headway, but we at any rate kept ourselves from drifting seaward.

Gradually there spread over the ocean that strange weird light which precedes the rising of the sun in the tropics. It is a light that comes up suddenly, not gradually, and is unlike anything seen in the temperate zone; and then, as the light increases, the colours in the sky are beyond the power of any words to describe, nor does the painter's palette contain any pigments that could imitate them. In fact, any painting that man could produce would be but

a feeble representation of the glories of a tropical sunrise. The magnificence of the cloud forms, the overpowering brilliancy of colour, the dazzling light, the clearness of the atmosphere before the sun is well above the horizon must be seen before it can be understood; and that man who has not seen these things is to be pitied, for he knows not what colour is.

Before the haze set in, which always comes on after the sun is well up, I was enabled to make out high land with the naked eye. This encouraged us to renewed exertions, and, as it fell a dead calm again, we made good progress, although the heat was terrific. Gradually, as the day advanced, the land grew more distinct, and we were enabled to see the long line of palm-fringed coast, against which the Pacific rollers broke in boiling foam. There was a high headland bearing due east, and which I felt sure was Point St. Helena, we therefore pulled more to the south, so as to get into the gulf, which lies considerably to the southward of the Point.

We began to suffer terribly from thirst, and had exhausted our rum. There was a beaker of water aboard the raft, but it was foul, though we drank a little of it. We also broached the cask of provisions, and found that it contained for the most part dried flesh of some sort, and which Chips, who professed to

know, pronounced to be bear's flesh. There were also some hard ship's biscuits, so that we were enabled to make a fair meal, and, that over, we felt considerably refreshed, and we renewed our labour cheerfully. We soon became aware, however, that the land was much further off than we anticipated, and when night closed in we were still on the open sea; and we began then to seriously consider the advisability of taking the chest of gold and the ammunition and firearms into the boat and cutting the raft adrift.

CHAPTER V.

WE MAKE A DISCOVERY AND BURY THE BODY.

I CONFESS that for my own part I had a strong objection to parting with the raft. Perhaps this was due more to a feeling of sentiment than anything else, for I had an irresistible desire to give the mortal remains that the raft carried Christian burial, and not let them become food for the ravenous sharks, for which I entertained a fierce hatred, as all sailors do. I therefore urged the men to fresh efforts. The night was intensely dark. There was not a star in the sky, but in the sea were phosphorescent gleams and flashes of light that were weird and startling, for they were so pale and ghostly. We knew that these gleams were made by the sharks as they thrust their black fins above the water, and I for one could not suppress a shudder as I thought how little there was separating us from the hideous teeth of these accursed fish.

Our position, certainly, was far from enviable, for

it was impossible to tell where we were going to. We could not steer because we had nothing to guide us, neither compass nor stars, and could not see the land. The atmosphere was stagnant and frightfully oppressive, and I felt sure that a storm was brewing. I told the men to keep pulling steadily, and to be careful to pull in unison, so as not to slew the boat's head round, and so get off our course. I kept her as straight as I could with the rudder, and strained my ears to catch the sound of the surf. But all was silent as the grave, save for the plash of the oars, as they dipped and rose. Presently the whole sea and sky seemed to burst into a sheet of dazzling flame, that temporarily blinded us; and it was followed by a peal of thunder that was terrific. Then down came the rain, the drops as big as buckets. Any one who has never experienced a tropical storm of this kind cannot possibly realize what it is like. The coast of Ecuador is peculiarly liable to sudden storms and squalls, and they are amongst the most violent of any that visit tropical regions.

So heavy was the rain with us, that we had to drop the oars and take to bailing the boat as hard as we could, or we should have been swamped and sunk. We needed no light now, for the lightning was incessant; one instant it came in the form of sheets of

blue flame, and the next in a thousand blood-red forks that darted from all points of the compass. The thunder crashed and rolled with deafening din, and it seemed as if several storms were raging at once, for peal answered peal, and a roar that began in the west was met by one coming from the east, and the fearful rain beat and lashed the sea into snowy whiteness, and hissed like a million serpents. It was awfully sublime, and in spite of my miserable condition, through being drenched to the skin, I could not help but feel deeply impressed by these wonderful forces of nature.

For two long hours this appalling storm raged, then the rain began to cease; the lightning only came in fitful flashes, and the thunder growled afar off; and in another half-hour it had fallen a dead calm again, and the stars began to show themselves, for which we were truly thankful, as we were enabled to set a course and keep it. But first of all we refreshed ourselves with hearty draughts of rain water, which we had saved in a bucket, and we also ate some of the dried flesh from the provision cask. Then we took off our clothes, and wrung them as dry as we possibly could, and having thus made ourselves a little more comfortable, we settled down to work, for we did not want to spend another night on the

water. Presently the golden light of the dawning day began to spread itself over the ocean; and all the wonderful colours that precede the rising of the tropical sun dyed the heavens. The very brilliancy of the colours—that seem almost preternatural to northern eyes—was startling, and yet even a clod must have been impressed, for in these tropical sunrises there are forms, tones, and blendings of colour that seem to require the creation of new words wherewith to describe them. The splendour is dazzling, no less than bewildering, and in trying to depict it painters have been driven to despair. It is, in fact, idyllic, incredible even when you have seen it, for somehow you feel as if you have been in a dream, and what you have seen is as deceptively beautiful as dream-pictures ever are.

Casting our eyes ahead, we beheld, not more than five miles off, a magnificent coast-line. A little to the right of our starboard bow was a break, and here there seemed to float in creamy mist an exquisite island, on which grew a wealth of luxuriant tropical foliage of every possible shade of green, the lordly palms towering over all. I could not suppress an exclamation of joy at finding how close we were to the land. I had no doubt that the break in the coast-line was the mouth of the Gulf of Guayaquil, and the

island was Puna Island, which stands right in the fair way of the channel. Rising above the palm-fringed coast was a wondrous mass of snow-clad mountains, one seeming to tower to the very heavens, its snow all golden with the glory of the rising sun. I subsequently learned that this magnificent mountain was known as Chimborazo, according to modern spelling, but called by the Indians Chimpuraza, which means "The Mountain of Snow." It is nearly twenty-two thousand feet high.

I have always been a lover of grand scenery, and now I gazed in dumb wonderment, and with a reverential and awed kind of feeling at the superlatively magnificent panorama that stretched from north to south as far as the eye could reach in one unbroken line. Presently my reverie was disturbed by the carpenter speaking.

"Mr. Feldje," he said, "don't you think we had better make for the island? We shall be able to refresh ourselves and get our bearings before starting in search of this wonderful region of gold, and we can also bury those dead things there."

I considered the suggestion a good one, for I remembered to have read in our sailing instructions for this coast that the "Island of Puna at the mouth of the Gulf of Guayaquil" was uninhabited. That was

an advantage to us until we felt our feet, as the saying is; for I had also read that travelling in Ecuador was very dangerous, owing to the bands of savage and lawless Indians that roamed about the country. It was therefore important that we should recruit our strength and lay down some sort of fixed plan to guide us in our future wanderings. I therefore told the men to pull to the island, though little did I dream what a surprise was in store for us. We found that the sea-face of Puna was jagged and rocky precipices that rendered landing out of the question, and so we pulled round until, to our intense delight, we came to an exquisite little bay on the gulf side, with a sloping sandy shore that was like a sheet of hammered gold. As with a sense of relief and thankfulness we pulled into this welcome retreat, Jim Smith suddenly sang out—

"Hullo, there is a boat-load of niggers!"

Directing our gaze to where he pointed, we saw, some distance up the gulf, and near the left shore, what seemed to be a canoe filled with Indians. They were resting on their oars, as if watching us. Then they suddenly began to pull rapidly, and disappeared round a jutting headland, so that we lost sight of them. I did not attach any importance to this little incident, but Nixon, the boatswain, remarked thoughtfully—

"It strikes me we shall have to keep our weather eyes open, for these black devils may mean us mischief."

"Weel, I think we are a match for a few hunder of them," put in Chips drily.

"Bedad," cried out Barney Fagan, "if I could only get hold of a nate blackthorn twig for a shillelagh, I'd face all the Injuns in the country, so I would, and sorra a one would I lave wid a whole skull. Be the powers, but I'm just burning to ax 'em to tread on the tail av me coat."

"Well, Barney, my boy," I answered, "maybe before we've done you will have the chance of gratifying your desires."

The boat's keel now grated on the shelving beach, and a few vigorous strokes of the oars put her nose out of the water. Then Nixon, who was in the bow, sprang out and seized the painter, and we all followed as quickly as we could, and hauled the boat high and dry. It was not easy, however, to pull the raft up, so I ran along the shore to try and find a more suitable place. When I had gone about forty or fifty yards, I came to a little creek, where to my surprise I found that there were signs of some one having been working there; for the shore of the creek was strewn with chips of wood, such as are made by an adze.

There were little pieces of rope lying about, and the staves of casks; and a great quantity of a very lithe and very strong kind of wattle, which was almost like rope yarn. I then remembered that the timbers of the raft were lashed together with wattle, though a few turns of rope had been used to bind the lot together. Consequently it struck me that the dead man had made his raft in this little cove. It was certain that it must have been made on the coast somewhere, and as likely here as not.

Going back to my companions, I communicated my discovery, and, launching the boat again, we towed the raft round to the creek, where we moored it, perfectly sheltered from either wind or sea. That done, we proceeded to explore, and very soon we had the most ample evidence that my idea about the raft having been constructed there was correct. From the shore there was a well-worn track through the undergrowth towards the interior of the island; and, ollowing this up, we came to a little clearing, where a rough hut stood, built between two stately palms. I pushed open the door of the hut and peered in, but it was some moments before my eyes got accustomed to the gloom. Then I noticed that there were four sleeping-places like ship's bunks built against the side of the hut, and there were many other signs of the

place having been recently inhabited. Going outside, and about twenty yards off, some of the undergrowth had been cut away, and here there was a mound covered over with stones, and surmounted with a rough wooden cross. I had no doubt that this was a grave. The stones had quite recently been placed there, otherwise they would have been overgrown, for vegetation in this country springs up with amazing rapidity.

Coming back, I proceeded to more minutely examine the wooden house, hoping to learn something about those who had lived there, for it struck me that they might have been shipwrecked sailors. There was a shutter in the wooden wall, and, throwing open this, I let in a flood of light. There were two or three old tin plates and pannikins, such as are used on board a ship, and part of a seasoned cutty pipe, which seemed to be proof of my idea that some sailors had been there. In the mean time Chips and the others had been prowling about, and, meeting me, he said—

"I tell you what, sir; that raft has been made here, just as sure as I'm a Scotchman."

"How do you know, Sandy?" said I.

"Because thae pieces of wood lying aboot are the same as the logs in the raft, and the wattle's identical."

I had carefully searched the hut for papers, but had found nothing, and expressed my regret that we could not solve the mystery in connection with the raft and its occupants.

"Is it not likely," suggested the boatswain, "that the dead man may have something in his pockets that will give us some information?"

"Ay, true," I answered. "That never occurred to me. Well, let us get the body ashore, and then we'll see."

Jim Smith, who had been taking bearings, suddenly sung out that he had found a canoe under a rock, and, running forward, we saw a canoe bottom up. The strangers who had lived in the hut had no doubt used the canoe to come from the mainland with. Turning the canoe up, we revealed a sail that had been made out of a piece of English sail-cloth, and, seizing this, I said it would do for the poor dead fellow's shroud. We therefore carried it down to the raft, and, spreading it out, we placed the body in it, together with the head, and brought them ashore. It was not a pleasant job by any means, for the hot sun had done its work on the dead man, and it was high time that he was underground. As the others did not show any disposition to touch him, I stooped down and, holding my breath, searched his pockets,

and was rewarded by finding a well-worn and much-used note-book, which was filled with writing. There was also a brass tobacco-box, crammed with small pieces of pure gold, evidently specimens; and also a big jack-knife. That was all.

"I've no doubt, boys," I said, "that this book will give us some information, but in the mean time we must bury the dead man and that head."

"That's easier said than done," answered Nixon. "We have got nothing to make a grave with."

"Well, there is a newly made grave up there, and some tools must have been used for digging that. Probably they are somewhere about. Let us search the hut again."

In doing this, we found that below the bottom bunk was a locker that we had not noticed before. We quickly opened it, and saw to our delight several spades, three or four pickaxes, an adze, a large chopper, a hammer, a crowbar, some sail-needles, palm, twine, and a marling-spike. Furnished with these tools, we felt in luck's way, and we at once set to work to dig a grave alongside of the other one. In the course of a couple of hours we had fashioned a grave four and a half feet deep by six feet long. That job done, we sewed the corpse and the head up in the piece of sailcloth, and I asked my mates if

they knew what the parsons said when they buried people. But not one had any idea, and, as I was just as ignorant myself, I said we should have to bury the poor fellow without saying anything, unless it was the Lord's Prayer, which I did happen to know. So we all knelt down, and I repeated that prayer, and it was a pretty solemn kind of business altogether. I'm not ashamed to say that there was a sort of mist came into my eyes. When the prayer was finished, we lowered the bundle into the grave, and then shovelled in the dirt as fast as we could, feeling mighty glad that the job was over. We also got some pretty big pieces of rock, and piled on the top "to keep the dead man from coming out," as Barney said. The tobacco-box containing the gold I took charge of, it being understood that the gold was to be equally divided.

Our next care was to get the boxes from the raft, together with the provision cask, and place them in the hut, and, instinctively recognizing the necessity of having arms, we carefully collected the ammunition we had found in the box, and cleaned the guns. We had three guns between five of us, besides the large Spanish knives, so that we considered ourselves pretty well off, and felt that, if any fighting had to be done, we could give a good account of ourselves. As we

were all pretty well exhausted, we made a good meal off the dried flesh, and then turned in—my mates using the bunks, while I lay down on the ground, with my jacket for a pillow, and very soon we were all sound asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING STORY—WE FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

After sleeping for a good many hours, I awoke. The sun was low down, and, as my shipmates were still asleep, I decided not to disturb them. Probably I should not have awakened when I did myself had it not been for some insect stinging me pretty severely on the neck. It was, no doubt, a red or black ant or a spider. It could not have been anything worse, because I chewed a piece of tobacco and placed it on the wound, and that took the pain away, and I felt no further inconvenience. A scorpion, or centipede, or snake bite would not have yielded to such mild treatment.

As I saw that it would very soon be dark, I set to work to collect a quantity of wood and dried leaves, and made a fire, and, with the help of one of the axes, I fashioned a rough sort of seat, cutting wooden

pegs for nails, and making holes with the marling-spike. I then started off to take a turn over the island. It was only a small place, and in the centre was covered with such a tangle of undergrowth that it was impossible to make one's way. When I returned it was almost quite dark, and fireflies were flitting about in tens of thousands, looking like tiny flying stars. The fire had died down to embers, so I put on some more wood, and then looked in at my mates. They were still sleeping, and no wonder, for they were thoroughly exhausted with their long row. So I pulled out the dead man's pocket-book, and, seating myself by the fire, I proceeded to read the book. On the first page was the day of the month when the writer had commenced, and the year, and that date was only a fortnight before we had first seen the raft floating about in the Pacific. Following the date were these particulars:—

"As my companions are all ill, of what seems to be some deadly sort of fever, and as I do not feel up to much, and may probably succumb, as most of them have done, and as the survivors seem to be doing, I solemnly charge any one into whose hands this may come, if he be a Christian, on penalty, if he fail, of being for ever cursed, and dying the death of a mangy dog in a ditch, to send any valuables I may

have about me, and the half of the gold I have secured, if it is at all possible, to Mary Ellen Freemantle, 48, —— Street, San Francisco, together with a sealed letter that will be found in the pocket at the end of this book.'

Naturally I turned here to the pocket referred to, and found the letter the writer spoke of, and I said to myself, "I shall send that letter to Mary Ellen Freemantle, if I live long enough to get the opportunity to do so, or may my dying wishes never be carried out, if I make any, which is likely enough."

After he had made his request, the writer gave the following particulars of himself:—

"My name is Peter Duncumbe, and I am forty-five years of age. I was born in Bristol, where my people occupied a good position, and gave me a fair education, intending that I should become a civil engineer. But I had a passion for the sea and a love for adventure, and I and a younger brother ran away from home and became sailors. My brother, however, tired of the rough life in two or three years, and as we both inherited a little money through the death of our parents, I turned my share over to him, and he went to Valparaiso and started in business. For some years I continued to knock about, and sub-

sequently joined the Dutch navy, in which I remained for five years, when I was discharged owing to an accident that for a time crippled me. As I was not in good health, I went to my brother in San Francisco, and helped him in his business, which was not flourishing. While there I made the acquaintance of Mary Ellen Freemantle, one of the best women that ever God made. I wanted to marry her, but her people objected on the score that I was of too roving a disposition and too poor. This stung me to the quick, and I determined to become rich, if gold was to be got in the world. I had often dreamed of wealth, and had worked out all sorts of Utopian schemes for getting it, but now I resolved to dream no more, but become practical.

"Two or three years before this, I was told by a man whom I met in Valparaiso that he had travelled in Ecuador, and he was perfectly sure that there were enormous quantities of gold quartz there of extraordinary richness, and he showed me some specimens which were almost pure gold. At that time, I thought he was merely telling a traveller's story, and did not attach much importance to what he said. But now, having been repulsed by Miss Freemantle's people, my memory reverted to what he had told me, and I resolved at all hazards to go to Ecuador, for I also

read up some good authorities, and found that they agreed in saying that the country was rich in mineral wealth; but the want of roads and the means of transport, as well as the hostility of the natives to foreign intrusion, rendered it impossible to work the minerals. Nothing deterred by this, I shipped as a hand before the mast in a brig that was bound to Callao, and, on arriving there, I deserted, and made my way north by the sea-coast. It was an adventurous journey, and several times I came well nigh losing my life. But at last I reached a little place called San Rosa, in Ecuador, where I made the acquaintance of a Spaniard, and I told him what I had come for. He agreed to go with me, and, as he knew the country, his companionship was likely to be valuable. We travelled into the interior, and after many months of awful hardship, we discovered a region where the gold was almost lying on the surface of the ground. This made such an impression on the Spaniard, and excited him to such an extent that he lost his head, and in a fit of frenzy, he threw himself over a precipice and was killed. As I could do nothing alone, I returned to San Rosa, where I got a passage in a coaster going down south to Ylo, on the coast of Peru. I waited there some weeks, and then got passage in another coaster bound for Copiapo,

in Chili. Here I found a British barque laden with guano. She had put in through stress of weather, and, as she had lost some of her hands, I had no difficulty in shipping. Her destination was Liverpool; we made a smart passage, and I almost immediately after got a ship for California, and in due time reached my home.

"I told my brother that in Ecuador was enormous wealth waiting for us to carry it away, and I asked him to join me. But he had become a very staid and settled sort of fellow. Moreover, he was married and had had four children, all of whom had died, and he said that he was so desirous of laying his bones with those of his children, that hardly anything would induce him to go to such a savage country, lest he might die there. I succeeded, however, in talking him out of this sentimental idea, and at last he consented to go, for he had suffered many losses in his business, poor fellow, on condition that I could get at least six other fellows to join us. In this I was successful, for my story of the wonderful gold country inflamed men's minds. My brother sold his business, and we raised amongst us a considerable sum of money for the expenses of the expedition; with this we laid in a large stock of necessary tools, provisions, etc., and

then, keeping our destination secret, we chartered a coasting trader and sailed for Columbia to the north of Ecuador. Here we left the vessel and struck inland, and after many hardships, during which one of the party died, we found the gold region.

"The perils and hardships that had dogged our footsteps from the moment of our entering the country increased now, for we had the greatest trouble in procuring provisions, and we were so beset by hostile Indians that we passed our lives in daily warfare. We had provided ourselves with arms, and were able to hold our own, but it was a terrible struggle. Nevertheless, we succeeded in obtaining a quantity of gold, though it took us twelve months to do so. Not but what we might have got it all in a week, so rich is the country, had we been unmolested. We had all suffered more or less from fever, and were greatly broken down in health. In fact, some of the party were all but helpless invalids, and so we resolved to make for the sea-coast, in the hope that we should fall in with a passing ship. We secured mules to carry our baggage and the precious box of gold; but the terrible country through which we passed to the east of the great mountains infected us with such serious illness that we never expected to live to see the coast. Another of our party did die, and was buried in an awfully

lonely spot in a bed of volcanic ashes that had fallen from the terrible Cotopaxi.

"Soon after this, we were overtaken by a party sent out by the Government to arrest us, for what they did not say, nor did we trouble ourselves to inquire; we were too desperate for that; and on our refusing to yield, a fight ensued, during which one of our party was shot dead, so that we were reduced to five. In spite of our weak and exhausted state, we managed to beat our assailants off, and escape, and after terrible sufferings reached Guayaquil. From a map I carried, I found there was an island known as Puna, at the mouth of the Gulf of Guayaquil, and we felt that would be the safest spot for us. We managed to get a supply of provisions and two canoes, and in the dead of night, so as to avoid being followed, we started down the gulf and fetched the island, where we soon rigged up a hut, for one of the party had been a ship's carpenter. The canoes we had with us were too frail to trust ourselves in on the Pacific, and we decided to build a boat, but this was found impracticable for many reasons, and we determined then to construct a raft, with oars and a sail, so that we might get into the track of ships. But before the raft was finished the awful fever carried off our three friends, and I and

my brother alone remained, and he too was stricken with the fever. Feeling that he was dying, he made me swear a solemn oath that, though I could not carry his body to be buried with his children in San Francisco, I would at least take his head. I took the oath, for somehow I could not bring myself to believe that he was dying. But, alas! he did die, and then I had no alternative but to keep my promise, so I cut his head off, then poured a quantity of native spirits into the veins, and placed it in the sun to dry. By dint of tremendous exertion I finished the raft myself, and launched it, although I was very ill at the time; and my hope now was that I might fall in with some ship. I did not care where she was bound to, so long as she landed me in some civilized spot, and with this hope I left the island under cover of darkness, and was drifted out to sea by the tremendous current that flows down the gulf."

This startling and truly strange narrative ended here. But the sequel was told in the bit of manuscript which I had found in the chest of gold which the unhappy man was not destined to enjoy. The feelings engendered in me by reading this pathetic story were not very lively, and, though Peter Duncumbe averred that he had discovered an El Dorado, it seemed from his own experiences that the dangers

and difficulties that would beset those who would attempt to reach it were so terrible that it was doubtful if the game was worth the candle. I will confess frankly here that if the means had at that moment been at hand for me to leave the country, I would have taken advantage of them, for I thought to myself, "Where Peter Duncumbe and his well-organized party failed, how can we runaway sailors with nothing hope to succeed?" As I have honestly stated what my feelings were, let me also declare that the feeling of depression begotten by the perusal of the sad narrative did not last long, and an hour later I was as eager to go forward as ever Peter Duncumbe could possibly have been. Two things, however, I resolved upon. The first was, not to communicate the story of the note-book to my mates, for I did not see that it could serve any purpose, and it might produce in them a more lasting impression than it had done on me; and secondly, the first thing on the morrow we would secrete the box of gold by burying it. So I smoked a pipe, and as the others still slept, I, too, went and turned in, as the big silver moon was coming up out of the sea and throwing a wonderful sheen of glittering light over the heaving waters. When I say I turned in, let it be understood that I simply bunked down on the ground with my jacket

wrapped round a block of wood for a pillow. It was not one of the most luxurious of couches, but a tired man who is weary with toil in the open air is not very particular, and sailors of all men know how to make the best of a soft plank.

How long I slept I really don't know, but I awoke suddenly. Possibly some noise had startled me into wakefulness, though I have no remembrance of having heard anything; but what happened was this: I had left the door of the hut open, and the light of the moon was streaming in, and I saw figures of men plainly outlined against the light. Thinking they were my companions, I called out—

"Is that you, mates?"

The words had scarcely left my lips when I felt myself seized, and though I attempted to struggle to my feet and tackle my assailants, I had been taken at such a disadvantage that I was powerless, and I was bound hand and foot with stout cords. Then the men in the bunks were seized before they could offer any resistance, and bound in a like manner.

It did not take many minutes to carry out this little drama, and we soon realized that we were prisoners, and surrounded with armed half-breed Indians. Oh, how bitterly I cursed my folly then for not having buried the box of gold before lying down to sleep;

in fact, for even sleeping at all, remembering, as I did, that when we were coming to the island we had seen a boat-load of Indians, who must have been watching us, and now through our want of the most ordinary caution, we had been taken prisoners without a blow being struck, and all was lost.

A man who was evidently in command now approached. He was a half-breed, and a fierce, fiery-eyed looking fellow, armed with a formidable weapon in the shape of a sword-knife, with a long, keen, pointed blade that would have gone through a man's body as easily as a skewer goes through a piece of beefsteak. He spoke a few words of broken English, and he gave us to understand that if we disobeyed him, or offered the slightest resistance, we should be cut to pieces without any compunction.

"Boys," said I to my mates, "we have fallen into a trap like fools that we are, but I don't think these savages can mean to murder us in cold blood. Anyway, since we are bound and helpless, we have nothing for it but to submit, and trust to luck."

"Howly Moses!" muttered Barney Fagan, "if Oi only had me arums free and a shillelagh in me hand, Oi'd make these hathens think there were mad bulls about; be jabers, Oi would."

Poor Barney, however, was as powerless as the

rest of us, and our captors having placed us in a row, chained us together with a chain on each side, and we were ordered to go out into the open air. Then we saw the precious box of gold, together with the guns and tools, carried down towards the shore, and as the daylight was breaking we were commanded to march, a file of Indians being on either side of us, and the fellow with the formidable knife bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER VII.

AT QUITO—THE TRIAL.

Our sense of ignominy and humiliation was complete as we thus found ourselves helpless and bound by a number of men, whom, I'll undertake to swear, we five sailor men could have knocked into smithereens in a brace of shakes, if they had only given us half a chance. Moreover, the knowledge that we had lost that precious box of gold was maddening, and I know that I for one cursed the folly that had led us into this predicament. The most ordinary caution might have prevented it. Had we only set a watch as on ship-board, these wretched half-breeds would have had a different tale to tell, I warrant. However, the mischief was done, and we were helpless in our fetters, so I said in a low voice to my mates—

"Boys, we are in a precious pickle, but it would be useless showing fight now."

They acquiesced in this, but they were all very

despondent. I saw that, and I tried to rally them. Then, turning to the swab who carried the cheese-knife, as Barney called it, I asked him why we had been taken prisoners, where we were being taken to, and what was to be done with us?

He grinned diabolically, and showed his white gleaming teeth, that were as white as ivory, and he answered with a malicious unction and in broken English—

"You tiefs and murderers, many days we watch. Catch you. Now we take you to Quito, and make you hang."

As he uttered the last sentence he went through a pantomimic action of putting a rope round his neck, pulling it tight, and then turning up the whites of his coal-black eyes, and lolling out his tongue.

"The Lord save us!" cried Barney, in astonishment. "Thieves and murderers are we! Well, bedad, if you can prove that against us, you dirty, ugly spalpeen, Oi'll give you lave to hang me any way."

For my own part, my spirits rose, as I heard what we had been taken prisoners for, because I thought if there was a scrap of justice in the country we couldn't be detained, as it was not possible to bring any evidence against us.

"The fac' is," said Chips, "they've just mista'en us for the ither fellows wha came frae the Valley of Gold."

With this a new light dawned upon me, for I saw how highly probable it was that Chips was right. We were the victims of an error, and I could not help thinking that we should be able to set matters right when we got to Quito, which I remembered to have read was the seat of the Government—that is, of the Government of La Republica del Ecuador, for I need scarcely remind my readers that Ecuador was and is an independent state of South America. As I had been off this coast three or four times in the course of my seafaring career, I had read up a good deal about the country, for it had always possessed a certain fascination for me. The marvellous mountains, which include Chimborazo and the loftiest volcano in the world—Cotopaxi—filled me with wonder, for these great peaks can be seen in clear weather by ships at sea at a distance of more than a hundred miles. Then, again, I knew that the country was practically unexplored, as far as the outside world went, and it was surrounded with mystery, which, to an adventurous spirit like myself, was irresistible. I knew that Quito had on several occasions been covered with ashes and pumice from the mighty mountain

called Pichincha, or the boiling mountain, and which dominates the town itself, built on a plain 9500 feet above the sea level.

Thus far had my knowledge of this strange country gone, but little did I dream that the day would come when I should find myself travelling in it; and, what was more, a prisoner, fettered and bound, as if I had been one of the most desperate felons on the face of the earth.

It can readily be imagined that my feelings were of a very mixed kind as I marched along with my companions in misfortune. Hope and despair alternated, though I am bound to say hope was the stronger, for I could not bring myself to think that the strange Fate which had placed me there had simply done so to sacrifice me.

When we reached the shore of the island, we found three canoes lying there, with several Indians in them, all of them armed with formidable-looking knives. We were placed in the largest of the canoes, and then a sail was hoisted, and, followed by the others, we proceeded up the gulf to its head, where the town of Guayaquil is situated. We reached this place at night, and were at once marched to the prison-house, a low building in the centre of the town, guarded by half a dozen soldiers, who reminded

me forcibly of the tin soldiers that children get in their toy-boxes. We were all thrust into a villainous hole that would not have been good enough even for dogs. It was a long, low narrow cell, with scarcely any ventilation. The floor was the natural earth, and the walls were dripping with moisture. The chain that bound us all together was taken off, but each of us was fettered with another chain, fastened to the wrists and legs. It allowed but a very limited use of the hands, and kept the legs so close together that walking was almost out of the question. Our captors must have had a wholesome dread of our powers, or they would hardly have chained us up as if we had been ferocious animals from the depths of their jungles.

Having secured us in the way I have mentioned, some very coarse food was given to us, and a supply of fœtid water, together with pieces of matting to lie on. When we had finished our repast, which extreme hunger alone made palatable, we spread our mats, then, thoroughly wearied out, threw ourselves down, and were soon sound asleep.

We remained in this place four days, but the greater part of the day we were allowed to sit or walk about in a courtyard of very limited dimensions, while four or five of the toy soldiers, with matchlocks over

their shoulders, kept watch and ward over us. It was dreadfully monotonous, while the suspense was enough to torture one into insanity, for we could get no information from any one. If we asked a question, it made no matter who the person was, he showed his white teeth, shrugged his shoulders, and puffed out a volume of cigarette smoke, for every one smoked cigarettes the whole livelong day; in fact, I do not think they ceased smoking even when they were asleep. The common people made their cigarettes with some sort of a leaf, which they rolled most dexterously. The tobacco, however, that they used was exceedingly bad, and emitted a most offensive smell when burning, reminding one for all the world of burning cow-dung. But every one thinks his own choice the best, for when we gave a little of our good old navy plug to some of the soldiers, they pulled wry faces, pretended to vomit, and exclaimed, "Ni bono, ni bono!"

On the morning of the fifth day, we were told that we were going forward, and once more we were chained together and taken from the prison. When we got outside, we found that a great crowd had assembled to gaze at us. They were surrounded with a haze of tobacco-smoke, for men, women, and children were smoking alike.

"Do the hathens take us for wild beasts?" exclaimed Barney, indignantly, as the crowd struggled amongst themselves to get a view of us.

We were marched through the street, followed by the mob, to a little wooden pier on a river which I found out afterwards was the Guayas, and here we were placed on board of a peculiar sort of boat that was rowed by Indians. With but short rests, they rowed all day and all night, and the following morning we arrived at a place called Bodegas, where we quitted the boat, and the chain that bound us together was taken off, and each of us was put on a mule, our guard mounting mules also, and in this way we headed north for some distance, until we turned east, right under the shadows of the mighty Chimborazo. It is a wonderful sight, and made a strong impression upon me. We now began to mount the shoulder of the mountain by a fairly well-made road, and the whole of the day we toiled up and up until we were nearly fourteen thousand feet above the sea-level, and in a bleak and barren spot we encamped for the night; a fire being made of a sort of sage bush, that caused a great smoke, and only smouldered, although it gave a great heat. The temperature here at this great altitude during the night was bitterly cold, notwithstanding that we were almost on the equator.

We felt the cold intensely, as we had only light tropical clothing on. The guard told us that the place was called the *Arenal Grande*.*

Early the next morning we resumed the journey and began to descend towards the great plain of Quito, but we did not reach the town of that name until the following day, and we were at once thrown into prison, which was a more extensive and somewhat better place than that of Guayaquil.† We at once demanded to see some one in authority, that we

* *Arenal Grande* means the Great Pass. The route described is that used since the Spanish Conquest, and is the shortest road between Guayaquil and Quito. This tremendous mountain region is bisected by deep valleys, or rather plains, the principal ones being the Quito, 9500 feet above the sea; Ambato, 8500 feet; and Cuenca, 7800 feet. Quito, strangely enough, although the highest, is clothed with magnificent forests, while the others are little more than regions of desolation, that are swept by terrific storms. As may be understood, there is comparatively little level road in a country of such gigantic mountains, and communication from one valley to another is by means of *arenales*, as they are called, that is, passes which traverse the ridges, and in places rise to a great height.

† Quito was a kingdom, and a very ancient one, up to the beginning of the present century. It is said to have been originally founded about A.D. 280 by foreign invaders, although their nationality is not known. This kingdom lasted for twelve hundred years, and was extended by wars and political alliance over neighbouring dominions. No town in the whole world is probably more grandly situated than Quito. Around the valley are grouped no less than twenty superb volcanic peaks, of the most varied and surprising forms, and not one less than about fourteen thousand feet above the sea-level. They include the highest active volcano in the world, namely, Cotopaxi, also Cayambe, Antisana, Pichincha, Mount Ilinitzo, Chimborazo, with its wonderful wall of ice, and many others.

might know what was the specific charge against us. This demand, however, was not complied with, but we were relieved of our chains and allowed a little more freedom, although we were always closely guarded. For eight long weeks we lay in prison, and were not altogether badly treated, as things go. The governor of the prison was a Spaniard, and he had a daughter, about nineteen years of age, named Nausiscaa. I think she was the most beautiful girl I ever saw. She manifested great interest in us, and visited us almost daily. She spoke very good English, and conversed freely with us, asking us many questions about ourselves and what we had come to Ecuador for. At first we prevaricated, but at length thought it was better to tell her the truth. She was much surprised, and said that there was a tradition in the country that in one of the loneliest and all but inaccessible regions there was a valley which was said to literally glitter with gold. Many explorers had been sent out to try and find it, but few of them ever returned, and those who did were broken down and haggard with the hardships they had endured. While the stories they told of their sufferings appalled those who heard them. Lately a rumour had been current that some foreigners, supposed to be Englishmen, had penetrated into the interior and discovered the

marvellous valley. It was not believed, however, until it was asserted in the most positive manner that they had been seen making their way towards the coast, and at Guayaquil they had stolen some canoes and had gone down the gulf. Soldiers were sent out after them, but could not overtake them, and it was supposed they had either perished or had escaped to sea.* At length some of those who were searching for them espied us and traced us to the island. At first, it was thought that we were the men, but we were seen towing a raft with a dead man on it; and the conclusion arrived at was that we must have come from some ship, but knew those who had escaped. The reason we had been kept so long in prison was the difficulty of formulating a specific charge against us. We now for the first time under-

* The situation here introduced is not exaggerated. At the period of the story the country of Ecuador was only partially explored; in fact, even at the present day it is almost a *terra incognita*. The population was sparse, from official statistics, not more than about 1,000,000, exclusive of something like 200,000 wild Indians. Yet the area of the country, that is, the plains, is given as something like 127,205 English square miles. A vast proportion of this area was absolutely uninhabited. The people, especially away from the coast, lived in communities, quite isolated from each other. The difficulties of communication, owing to the want of roads, was very great, and news from the interior took a long time to filter down to the coast countries. There was a most inadequate police system, and the standing army only amounted to about three thousand men. It will thus be seen how easy it was for a few determined men to set the Government at defiance.—THE AUTHOR.

stood our position more clearly, and I, at least, was not surprised that we had been treated as we had been in a land where there was so much red-tapism and very little justice for foreigners.

Between Barney Fagan and this beautiful girl there had gradually sprung up a mutual liking, that one could see plainly was ripening into love. Barney was a splendidly made, handsome fellow, and it was not surprising that he should attract the attention of this beautiful maiden, who knew very little of the world.

At length, one morning we were told that on the following day we should be brought up for examination, and we all, with the exception perhaps of Barney, who seemed to be quite happy and contented now, uttered a sigh of relief as we heard that there was a likelihood of an end being put to our suspense.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SENTENCE.

The next morning we were marched from the prison to the court-house under a strong guard. This court-house was a large stone building standing in a square, surrounded with tall palmetto trees and a few other tropical trees, although they did not seem to flourish at this height. A great many pompous-looking individuals, dressed in extraordinary uniforms and wearing swords, were lounging about, each with the inevitable cigarette between his lips. We were evidently the objects of great curiosity, for the fellows stared at us as though we had been some remarkable species of ape. We were taken into the court itself, and placed in a row between two wooden bars. On a raised dais covered with crimson cloth was the chief judge—a magnificent-looking personage, no doubt, in his own estimation. He was as dark as a Creole, with big, piercing eyes and a powerful bass voice.

On each side of him sat four or five other judges. And now what I suppose I must call our trial began. But it was all a burlesque to us, for none of them could speak English; but, as we were subsequently to learn, it was anything but a burlesque in its results. With the exception of a short interval, when we were taken out and given some refreshments, we were kept in the court until dark, and then conveyed back to the prison, wondering what the whole business had amounted to, and what was to be done with us.

For two days we were kept in suspense, but at last we were escorted to the chief magistrate's house, where, to our surprise, we found the beautiful Nausiscaa. She looked much distressed, and we soon learned why she was there. She had been brought as an interpreter, for it seems she was the only person in the whole town who could speak our language with anything like fluency; and she was now required, firstly, to inform us what we had been arrested for; secondly, what was done at the trial; and, thirdly, what the sentence was. A fierce-looking moustached don, who I took to be the magistrates' clerk, read from a ponderous and voluminous document, and having read a few sentences, he paused, and Nausiscaa translated them for our benefit. I do not intend to

inflict this remarkable document on the reader, but will briefly state that Peter Duncumbe and his companions had entered the country and searched for gold in defiance of a law which prohibited a foreigner, without special license from the Government, from digging for precious metals; that Duncumbe and his companions had managed to escape; and that we had been arrested, as it was believed we had murdered them, and though there was no direct evidence to that effect, we were found in possession of a box of gold which was known to have been Duncumbe's.

The evidence adduced against us on the trial was to the effect that we had been found on Puna Island, living in a hut that had been secretly built there, and that, apart from the gold, we also had in our possession firearms, knives, and ammunition, which was accounted as an act of war. When we heard this read out we all laughed, for it seemed so utterly ridiculous, though technically perhaps, according to the law of the country, it was right, for, being foreigners, with no legitimate business there, we were found in possession of firearms. And now came the most serious part of all. The document went on to state that we had been duly and fairly tried in accordance with the constitution of the country, and, as our offence was a grave one, we had been sentenced,

and that sentence had been ratified by the president, to ten years' labour in the quicksilver mines of Azogues.* We were, of course, in utter ignorance as to where this place was; in fact, we did not even know that there were such mines in the country. But the sentence came upon us with a shock, and seemed to entirely annihilate our hope. Not one of us had ever seen a quicksilver mine, but we had all heard no doubt of the deadly effects of quicksilver on those who worked amongst it; and to be sent to labour in these mines was virtually a death sentence. Truly we had got ourselves into a nice predicament through deserting the ship, and the dream of wealth we had indulged in appeared to be dissipated to the winds.

Taking upon myself to act as spokesman, I said that the charge against us was monstrous, and the sentence diabolical, and that the British nation would send a fleet and an army to rescue us, and blow this precious country and its Government into the sea.

This was very foolish talk of mine, no doubt, but what man would not talk foolish in such a case?

* The town of Azogues is situated in the interior of the country, and is noted for its quicksilver mines, which have been worked from time immemorial. As the occupation of getting the mineral is very deadly, and brings on the most frightful diseases in the workmen, the labour is carried on mainly by convicts.

The old magistrate only smiled, and puffed the smoke from his cigarette in a contemptuous way, as if he thought of and cared for us as little as he did for that smoke. I glanced round, to see if it was not possible to make a dash for liberty, and I think my mates must have divined my thoughts by some strange intuition, for they moved a little closer to me, and their eyes blazed. But we all realized how utterly helpless we were, for not only were our hands manacled, but we were surrounded by a dozen swarthy devils, each armed with a formidable sword-knife, which he held drawn and ready to plunge into us if we made any show of resistance. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to accept our fate with the best resignation we could. We were ordered to form in line, and were marched out between the guard, and as we went I noticed that the sweet face of Nausiscaa was filled with sympathy and sorrow.

I do not think it shows any want of courage in confessing that as we went back to the prison we were utterly cast down and broken-spirited, and we would readily have changed our positions just then for the very humblest position in the worst ship that ever sailed the salt seas.

CHAPTER IX.

NAUSISCAA THE BEAUTIFUL.

For several weeks we languished in prison, and could get no information as to when we were to be taken away. During this time Nausiscaa visited us almost daily. Although we were so closely guarded as to render escape practically impossible, unless we could have got firearms, when we might have made a fight for freedom, the prison regulations were very lax, and traders and people of the town were allowed to pass in and out without let or hindrance. The papers which had belonged to Peter Duncumbe I had carefully preserved, and also the tobacco-box containing the pieces of gold. This gold served us in good stead now, as we sold it, and with the proceeds were enabled to purchase extra food, without which I believe we should have been all but starved. The prison diet consisted of what was known as *mashka*, a coarse kind of barley flour, that was often very dirty, and

very full of cockroaches, for, as we subsequently learned, these filthy insects swarm like a plague all over Ecuador, and it is impossible to keep them out of the food.

The mashka is eaten raw, though sometimes as a luxury it was boiled for us, and salt and spice added. In addition, we got an occasional supply of yams and sweet potatoes, with every other day about a pound of very coarse black bread, which was, however, usually so full of insects that we could not eat it. For drink, we got water just slightly flavoured with an exceedingly sweet spirit, a sort of rum or arrach made from sugar-cane grown by the civilized Indians.

There was one thing we could not be indifferent to, and that was that Nausiscaa had fallen desperately in love with Barney Fagan.

"Barney," I said to him one day, "that lass is dead nuts on you."

"Begorra, Oi know that," he exclaimed, "and Oi'm dead nuts on her. She's a jewel, that's what she is, and Oi'm just breaking me heart for love of her."

No obstacles were placed in the way of their conversing freely and spending much time together in the courtyard of the prison, where we were allowed to sit the great part of the day, for they gave us no work to do. And so, of course the lovers improved the

occasion and made desperate love to each other. Nausiscaa's father, the governor—her mother was dead—was a stupid, ignorant, dirty half-caste, who, when he was not eating, drinking, or playing cards, was sleeping. His household was ruled by his sister, a perfect demon, Nausiscaa said, and the girl hated her. Sometimes when she came to us she was weeping, and she often told us that her aunt scolded her very much, and often whipped her. At such times she would grind her white teeth savagely, and her dark eyes flashed fire, as she exclaimed—

"The ugly, old diabolo! I should like to kill her!"

Barney, of course, sympathized very deeply with the poor girl, and she showed herself truly grateful for the sympathy. She gave us much information about the country. She had been born not far from the great river Napo, in "La Provincia del Oriente;" that is, the eastern interior of the country, about which very little was known. Her father used to grow sugar-cane, and trade it with the Jívaros Indians, an extensive and wild tribe of barbarians, who inhabit the mysterious country through which the Napo flows in its course to the head waters of the mighty Amazon. In return for the cane and a few commodities, such as axes, *machetes*, and *lienzo* (a very coarse, unbleached cotton cloth), the Indians gave

gold, which they were supposed to get from the beds of the smaller rivers.* Here she remained until she

* Very little more is known of the strange "Province del Oriente," even at the present day, for the difficulties of travelling through the country are tremendous. The traders are nearly all half-castes—that is, a mixture of Indian and Spanish blood. The oppression practised by the Spaniards after the conquest was so intolerable that the Indian tribes rose and laid waste many Spanish villages, massacring men, women, and children, but sparing the young girls, whom they carried off to their wild regions. The result was the race of half-castes, who are a power in the country even at the present day. These people are the go-betweens who carry on the trade between the civilized provinces of the west and the wandering Indians of the east, who are known as Jívaros, which is a generic term, and includes two great classes termed by the Ecuadorians "Indios" and "Infieles." The first-named are semi-Christians, having been brought under the influence of Catholic missionaries as far back as the beginning of the sixteenth century. They speak a peculiar language, called Quichua, and eat salt. The "Infieles," on the other hand, will not touch salt, and are infidels pure and simple. They are a rude, brave race, and wander over the country from the Napo through the grand and gloomy forests to the Amazons. They are held in contempt by the "Indios," who term them "Aucas." This expression, which was common in Peru under the Incas, is a term of reproach, and means everything that is bad, including traitors, barbarians, thieves, and murderers. Although these two great tribes made common cause against the Spaniards, for they were both oppressed alike, there is undying enmity between them, and they slaughter each other whenever opportunity occurs. Both tribes alike are very treacherous, and exceedingly suspicious of foreigners, so that strangers travelling amongst them run grave risks; and, apart from this, the country is singularly unsalubrious, for, as the natives say, *Aqui llueve trece meres en el año—i.e.* It rains thirteen months out of the year. In consequence of this, thousands of square miles of the country are covered with dense, rank, and luxuriant forests, the haunts of wild animals, serpents, and all that is obnoxious, and as the powerful tropical sun is unable to penetrate the closely woven masses of foliage, the ground is an impassable swamp, except where the natives have made tracks by throwing into

was ten years of age, and as she wandered about a good deal amongst the Indians she learned their language and dialects, and came to know the country well. One day her father had a dispute with an Indian and killed him, and in revenge the deceased man's relatives attacked the little trading settlement. Nausiscaa's mother was killed, but her father escaped, taking his daughter with him, and as he owned some property in Quito, he settled there, and through influence he brought to bear he was appointed governor of the prison.

This was the girl's story, as we learned it from her own lips, and the information she gave us about the mysterious interior served to show that the journey we had contemplated was fraught with such peril that to attempt it was little short of madness. This was how I was at first impressed, but then I dwelt upon the fact that Peter Duncumbe and his companions had penetrated into the interior, and actually succeeded in gaining the coast again and taking an immense quanity of gold with them. It is true they had all succumbed to the unwholesomeness of the fever-breeding climate. "But," I argued with myself,

the black, unctuous ooze logs of trees. From these swamps rise the most deadly miasma, which is fatal to nearly all strangers who are unused to it.

"the fact is they stayed in the interior too long, until the fever had taken all the strength out of them. If they had got into the sea breezes sooner they might all have been saved." With this conviction in my mind, I should have had no hesitation in starting there and then in search of the wonderful El Dorado had I not been a prisoner. But that fact turned my heart to lead, and caused me to revile myself as a contemptible ass for having so easily fallen into such a predicament.

At length we were informed that a day had been fixed for our departure to the mines, and as I lay pondering that night on our future it suddenly occurred to me that Nausiscaa might prove of great assistance to us. The next day, therefore, I discussed the matter with Barney, who was very depressed at the prospect of parting from the sweet girl, and we agreed to speak to Nausiscaa and ask her if there would be any prospects of escape from Azogues. She told us that she knew nothing of the place, but would try and get some particulars. The next day, she informed us that all she had been able to learn was that Azogues was in charge of a civic governor and a military commandant, who had several hundred soldiers under him. This information made our hearts sink again, and stifled the hope that had begun to take shape.

At length came the hour for our departure. The night before there had been a very pathetic and sorrowful parting between Barney and Nausiscaa. She seemed unable to tear herself away from him. At length she did so, but said that she would see him again in the morning before going. She kept her word, and came about daybreak. Her beautiful eyes were suffused with tears, and she was evidently greatly agitated. Throwing her arms round his neck, notwithstanding our presence, she murmured—

"Ah, beloved of mine, how can I let thee go from me? But it shall not be for long, for I vow that ere two moons have waned I will go to Azogues to see thee."

Barney was immensely pleased at this, and became quite cheerful, and so, with many affectionate adieus, they parted. And now we were formed in line in the courtyard preparatory to starting on our strange journey.

CHAPTER X.

WE START FOR THE QUICKSILVER MINES.

We had been provided with suits of clothes made of lienzo, that is, the coarse cotton cloth, and which we found to be very comfortable and cool, and easily dried after being wet through. Instead of boots we had alparagates, as they are called. These are a sort of sandal, the sole of which is made of plaited aloe fibre. As we subsequently learned, these were the only things of any use in the swamps and dense primeval forests through which we were to pass. Of course they let in the water easily, and also let it out easily. Our head-gear consisted of a light pith hat with a very large brim, which served as an umbrella as well as a sunshade.

There were fifteen other prisoners going to the mines, so that we were a party of twenty. We were divided into two tens, and each of the ten was fastened to his neighbour by a light chain round the

waist, there being about six feet between each man. We also had to carry, strapped to our backs, a sort of basket made of the fibre of the palm, which was so beautifully twisted and plaited, and afterwards steeped in some sort of varnish, that it was practically waterproof. In this was our supply for the journey of mashka, that is, the barley flour, which is usually eaten raw. As it is very satisfying and sustaining, a month's supply may be easily carried. In addition, we had some very hard-baked cakes of Indian corn, made flat, and weighing about a quarter of a pound each.

It was a gloomy morning, with heavy rain falling, as we marched out of the prison-yard and commenced our journey. Our guard consisted of forty soldiers, armed with machetes and guns. There were also six peons, or porters, carrying heavy loads of stores.

A more dismal procession than we formed it would have been difficult to imagine. When I say we, I mean I and my mates. Our fellow-prisoners were Ecuadorian, and did not display their feelings, whatever they were. But it was different with us. We were foreigners, and our fate would remain a mystery to the friends and relatives we had left in the far-off land beyond the seas. Who could help being depressed under such circumstances? Then it was evident that

Barney was distressed at leaving Nausiscaa, and he was so preoccupied that he marched along like a man in a dream.

Having left the town, our route lay over the summit of a stupendous precipice, forming one of the walls of what is known as the great Quebrada. This is a gorge, or cañon, as the Americans would call it, of appalling depth. On either side, the walls, of bare rock, go down straight for nearly two thousand feet. At the bottom of the gorge flows an impetuous river, that fills the sombre ravine with echoing thunders. Never before had I beheld such a marvel of nature, and I gazed into those profound and gloomy depths with a sense of awe, and thought to myself, "How easy might a man end his woes in this world by taking a flying leap into the yawning chasm." Soon after passing this wonderful place, we struck into a dense forest, through which there was no made road, but only a track caused by people and mules passing along. The ground was a slimy, black mud, of the consistency of thick pea-soup, into which one sank at every step nearly to the knees, and we now learned the value of alparagates. Leather boots would have been absolutely useless. At last, we came to a river, the torrent of which was very much swollen by the rain, so that the waters tore by like a mill-race, and

with a roar that was deafening. At one part, almost in a line with our track, the water raced through a chasm about twenty feet wide, and over this were thrown two trunks of trees, that were so rotten that they were spongy, and brown like tan. This frail bridge was the only means of crossing, and I expected every minute to see the rotten trunks collapse, and the men who were crossing precipitated into the boiling waters, from which rescue would have been impossible. However, we got across all right, and we were to discover later on that this bridge, primitive and frail as it was, was infinitely superior to many of the contrivances used for crossing the numberless rivers of this wonderful country.

After a long day's march, which had fagged us out, for the slimy mud made travelling very fatiguing, we came to a *descausadas* (resting-place), where preparations were made for spending the night. It was a slight clearing in the forest, near a stream of water, and, aided by the peons, we proceeded to construct ranchos—that is, tents of sticks and leaves. They are rapidly put up; a horizontal stick resting on two upright ones, and tied together with *lianas*, a very tough fibre-like string that is found in the forests. Large palm-leaves are then used for roof and walls, their stalks stuck obliquely in the ground. These

improvised tents keep out the rain splendidly. Leaves were then piled on the ground for beds; but everything was sodden with moisture, for the parasitic creepers that weave themselves like carpets over the tops of the trees prevent the sun's rays, powerful as they are, from penetrating to the ground, which is in consequence always oozy and the home of many repulsive things, including centipedes, scorpions, snakes, and a huge louse, whose bite is most disagreeable and irritating. Besides these things that crawl and creep, the forests are the homes of jaguars of a very savage kind and tiger cats of a most fiendish nature, and against which at close quarters a man would have but little chance. Then one has to guard against the insidious and dangerous vampire bat. Without the slightest noise, these eerie things will settle beside a sleeping person, and, fastening on his cheek, his lip, nose, or ear, will make a puncture so gently and delicately as to give not the slightest pain. Then, as it sucks the sleeper's blood, it moves its wings backwards and forwards with a dreamy, rhythmical motion that tends to keep him asleep by the gentle fanning. When this hideous ghoul has sucked his fill—and he can hold a lot of blood—another is ready to take his place. And should the sleeper not wake, he runs the risk of being bled to

death; but under any circumstances he will rise weak and faint, and the loss of blood necessarily renders him more liable to fall a victim to the fever demon that lurks in all the primeval forests.

The next day, soon after it was light, we resumed our journey. The rain was still falling, and all the forest was steeped in a sort of vapour bath. Notwithstanding that we were so lightly clothed, the perspiration poured from us, and at times it almost seemed as if there was not sufficient oxygen to keep the lungs inflated; consequently, breathing was laborious and difficult. Part of the way we had to traverse a tremendous swamp, where the atmosphere was like steam from a boiler. Some attempt had been made to form a path by laying down trunks of trees; but these were black and slimy, and difficult to see, and afforded such insecure footing that nothing but the alparagates would have given us a hold. As it was, one of the Ecuadorian prisoners slipped into the greasy mud of the swamp, and instantly sank up to the neck. Had it not been for his being chained to his fellows, he must inevitably have been lost. And, as a fact, he was only extricated with difficulty, and then the shock had been so great that he fainted, and did not recover for nearly half an hour.

In the course of the afternoon we had to cross a

madly rushing river, which, so the peons told us, was twelve feet above its ordinary level, owing to the rains. The only means of crossing was by a frail rope bridge, and the supporting ropes were so rotten that some of the strands had parted. These ropes were stretched from trees on each bank, and then cross-bars of bark were placed across the ropes, and held in position by strips of lianas. So high was the water, that at times the rushing current washed over the bridge, and for a man to trust his life to such a frail, rotten concern seemed to be tempting Providence. But there was no help for it, and we were ordered to cross. The peons went first, one at a time, and the bridge swayed and stretched until the centre was absolutely under the water, that hissed, swirled, and roared as if greedy for prey. However, the peons got safely over, and then a prisoner crossed, and was instantly followed by a guard; but when the tenth man, who was a soldier, was on the bridge, one of the ropes parted near the tree. Down went the side of the extraordinary bridge, and the unfortunate man was shot into the mad, seething river. He gave one cry as he felt the bridge give way, then he passed from our sight, and we never beheld a trace of him more. Cleverly and dexterously the soldiers fished out the broken rope and rejoined it, and the whole

party managed to get across; but the risk was tremendous, and it was doubtful if the next travellers who came up would be able to perform the feat of crossing, unless new ropes were rigged. As the accident had caused considerable delay, and night was already closing in, we chose a descausadas near the river, and, putting up our ranchos, we made fires and had supper, and after that were thankful to throw ourselves on the soaking leaves, and very soon the silence of sleep has fallen on the camp.

How long we slept I know not before we were startled into wakefulness by the firing of a gun, and the report in the dead of night in that great forest was wonderful. The sound seemed to roll like thunder, and the sleeping things awoke with fright, until the whole wilderness was alive with a hideous uproar of birds, animals, and reptiles. The screech of some of the birds was unearthly, while the barking of gigantic swamp-toads was like the baying of mastiffs. Anything more infernal than the row that went on could not be imagined.

Of course we were all curious to know the cause of the alarm, and we learned that one of the guards saw the gleaming, fiery eyes of an animal that was stealthily approaching the camp. He had watched it for some little time, and then sent a bullet at it, and

the animal rolled over with a yell. Proceeding to the spot, we found a jaguar, not quite dead; but he was instantly brained with the butt-end of a musket. These animals are extraordinarily ferocious at times, and at night are very bold. By aid of torchlight, the soldiers and the peons at once proceeded to skin the jaguar, and cut him into joints. Had he been left there till the morning, all his flesh would have been eaten off his bones by the ants. Strips of the flesh were broiled over the fire for breakfast; and though, as a sailor-man, I have eaten a good many strange things in my time, my stomach, as did those of my mates, drew the line at that jaguar flesh. But the Ecuadorians, who will eat almost any kind of flesh, gorged themselves until the wonder was that they did not burst.

For many days we continued our journey through the dripping, steaming jungle; crossing many rivers by the most primitive means it is possible to conceive; traversing many *cuchillas*,* until at length,

* Not the least remarkable things in this truly remarkable country are peculiar geological formations called cuchillas (knives). The cuchilla is a ridge running for long distances, sometimes twelve to twenty miles, and with an elevation varying up to five hundred feet from the base. One side is usually perpendicular, and the other descends at an angle of from forty to sixty, and sometimes even steeper. These ridges are composed of loose vegetable earth and loam, and they are bound together by roots of trees, logs, rotten branches, and a

weary, footsore, and dispirited, we reached our destination.

tough, fibrous growth of vegetation. The cuchillas are supposed to be due to the denuding influence of water, which, in its course from the Andes to the Amazons, has scooped away the hollows. In travelling through the country the route generally runs along the top of these cuchillas, and they are so narrow in places as only to permit of one person passing at a time. Considerable caution has to be exercised, for the unwary traveller runs the risk of being precipitated to the depths below, and a fall from such a height would be fatal.—THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER XI.

YASOTOARÓ.

During our trying journey we—that is, my mates and I—had dreamed one dream, which was escape. We did not discuss the subject, for, notwithstanding that our conductors did not comprehend our language, we felt it safer to keep our thoughts to ourselves. But the subject was one in which we had a joint interest, and each knew that unless he could free himself he was doomed to years of slavery and a terrible death. What man so situated would not tax his mind to the utmost in order to devise some plan for liberating himself from such a fate? When we reached our destination, however, we conveyed to each other by unconscious signs of expression that our hopes were withered, as we beheld the guards posted on every coign of 'vantage, and saw that the vigilance exercised apparently rendered any attempt at escape out of the question. That, be it understood, was our first im-

pression, but ere I had been a week in the place I had formed totally different ideas, and for this reason. The soldiers and gaolers, or whatever they called themselves, were a miserable, puny lot of fellows, whose notions of keeping watch and ward seemed to be playing cards and smoking, and sleeping at every possible opportunity. There was a total absence of discipline such as would have been exercised in any European convict station, and the people in the town, including the soldiers and all who were in charge of the convicts, were a dirty, languid, sleepy, easy-going lot. They had all the characteristics of the natives throughout South America, the chief of these characteristics being a drowsy, nerveless disposition, the result, no doubt, in a large measure, of the climate. I came to the conclusion, then, that if I and my four mates could only arm ourselves with guns and cutlasses, we could set the whole blooming guard at defiance, and cut our way through them to freedom. We were big, powerful fellows, and all of us knew how to use arms. We were old sailors, too, used to hardship and danger, and the British blood that ran in our veins made us believe that each of us was a match for twenty at least of these Ecuadorian skunks. Of course, this egotistical faith in ourselves was all very well, and maybe was justified, but being

prisoners, and without arms, we were as helpless as if we had been so many unfledged boys. Even the strongest and most determined of men are powerless against an armed force, if they themselves are unarmed.

Notwithstanding all the disadvantages on our side, my hopes grew stronger after the first few days, for I thought to myself that if the beautiful Nausiscaa only kept her word and came to see us she might aid us, for what will a woman not do for the man she loves? Of course, the question was, Would she come? I did not doubt it myself, but poor Barney did. He seemed to sink into a state of utter despondency, and he told me half a dozen times a day that he wished he was dead. There is no doubt he was very much in love, and his separation from the woman who had enchanted him rendered him gloomy and hopeless.

For three weeks after our arrival we remained idle; why I do not know, unless it was due to the lethargic and inergetic nature of the officials. The discipline of the prison was ludicrous. With the exception of being allowed to go outside, we were at full liberty to promenade about, but our attention was called to what we were told was an inflexible rule—namely, that any prisoner attempting to escape was shot down without compunction, and that, apart from the

soldiers and civil guards, every inhabitant was compelled to do his best to kill an escaping prisoner, and every inhabitant sheltering a convict trying to escape would, on discovery, be summarily executed. It was considered that these conditions rendered escape practically impossible, and, in fact, we soon discovered that prisoners were so impressed with them that attempts to get free were never made. Now, I am sure of one thing, and that is, that these conditions did not appal me and my mates. The risks, no doubt, were so great that there were ninety-nine chances against one of a prisoner succeeding; but I do not hesitate to say that we had courage enough to commit ourselves to the hazard of that one chance had an opportunity offered. The prison, however, in which we found ourselves located was, under the circumstances, calculated to impress a prisoner with the utter uselessness of any attempt at getting out unless he wished to forfeit his life. The prison buildings were ranged round a square, to which the prisoners had free and unimpeded access. The only entrance from the outside to this square was by an archway on one side. Over the archway was an open gallery, in which night and day were posted a dozen armed sentinels. The archway was closed by a massive wooden gate, in charge of warders. This central block of buildings

was again surrounded by a walled-in space, the wall being nearly twenty feet high, with a platform every few yards, on which a sentinel was placed. The wall was pierced by two gateways only. It will thus be seen from this rough description that the prison was practically a stronghold, from which a person confined in it could not escape under ordinary circumstances.

At first, I was puzzled to understand why it was made so strong, but I soon found that the system pursued in this strange and isolated convict settlement was this. The convicts were divided into gangs. A gang laboured at the mines, which were some miles away, for two months, and were then brought into the prison, and allowed two weeks' holiday. This arrangement had been found necessary on account of the high rate of mortality amongst the workers, who broke down, became useless, and died very rapidly unless allowed a spell of this kind, which enabled them to hold out longer against the deadly effects of the quicksilver. And as they were not confined in cells in the gaol, but allowed to roam about, it was necessary that the building should be strong and well guarded.

At length, one morning at the end of a month, we were told that we were to go out to the mines; and we started off with a gang forty strong, under a guard of a hundred soldiers. The mines were situated in a

hill, or rather in a range of hills, the spot being as wild and desolate as one could imagine. The prisoners lived in small clusters of wooden huts, each cluster being isolated. There were about two hundred convicts at work at the same time, and there were double the number of soldiers and guards to look after them.

We soon learned from bitter experience that the labour was terrible, and calculated not only to speedily ruin a man physically, but to cause him to sink into a state of mental despondency that ultimately brought on madness, if he did not die in the mean time. Fortunately, my mates and I had frequent opportunities of conversing together, and we decided that we would not submit to this appalling slavery for long, for death were preferable. I believe that we should there and then have revolted, had it not been for Barney, who piteously appealed to us to wait, saying—

"Remember, boys, the dear little woman promised to come to us from Quito, and till she comes, don't let us do anything. Of course, she may not come, and I sometimes think that she won't; but let us wait a bit and see, anyway."

He had reason on his side, and we decided to wait, though I think, with the exception of myself, the feeling of my mates was she would not come. Herein

they did her a wrong, and miscalculated the strength of her love for Barney. She had vowed that ere two moons had waned she would join us, and sure enough, at the end of two months, to our intense joy, she put in an appearance. Although very little restriction was placed upon visitors to the prison in the town, no one without special permission was allowed to visit the convicts at the mines, where a very stern discipline was maintained. Nausiscaa, however, owing to her being the daughter of the governor of Quito prison, had got a special permit, and came out to see us; and never shall I forget the meeting between her and Barney. I am only a rough sailor man, without much sentiment, I think, in my nature; but hang me if a mist did not come into my eyes as I watched those two embrace each other, and heard the sigh with which she exclaimed—

"Ah! it were better to die a hundred deaths than to be separated from you."

Poor little woman! I did feel for her, for it seemed to me that there was an insurmountable barrier between her and her lover, and that, if her happiness and her life depended upon her becoming his wife, she was doomed.

She was only allowed to remain a few hours at the station, but when she had gone Barney was much

more cheerful and lively than he had been for a long time.

"Faix, but that's a dear creature!" he remarked, "and Oi wud sell me sowl to the divil for her swate sake. And look ye here, boys, if she doesn't get us out of this mess, then me name's not Barney Fagan."

He spoke so hopefully and enthusiastically that he raised our own drooping spirits, though not one of us had any idea how she was to accomplish our freedom.

At length the time came for us to enjoy our spell of idleness—"our watch below," as sailors would say—and it was not before we needed it, for the work was terribly trying, and weakened one very much. We were therefore marched from the mines to the prison in the town, and we passed on our way a batch of convicts coming out to take our place.

The day after our arrival Nausiscaa visited us in prison. I have already explained that inside of the prison the prisoners were allowed a good deal of freedom; that is, they could pass in and out of the courtyard as much as they liked. They could receive visitors, play cards, smoke, loll about, sleep, and enjoy themselves in their own way—of course, always under the supervision of the sentries. Visitors were freely admitted from ten till four. The free inhabitants of the town were for the most part civilized Indians;

but there were traders and merchants, including half-breeds, German Jews, and a few Spaniards. We subsequently learned that amongst the inhabitants was a countryman of our own, whose real name, as he told us, was Richard Jowell. But he had been forty years in South America, and had almost forgotten his own language. For ten years he had lived in Azogues, and was known by the name of Yasotoaró. He had a small estate of Yerba Maté (South American tea), and he also traded in quicksilver, which he sent to Europe. He was, besides, or rather had been, a mighty hunter. At this period he was an old man, nearly seventy-six years of age, although he was hale and hearty, and straight as a lath. When he heard that we were Britishers, he came to see us, and manifested the greatest interest in us. It appeared that Nausiscaa and he were well known to each other, for he had been in the habit of making periodical visits to Quito, and, having done a good deal of business with her father, he of course became acquainted with her.

As soon as I got to know this man, I told him the plain, unvarnished story of the adventures of myself and mates. I did not show him Duncumbe's papers, which I still carefully treasured, keeping them wrapped up in a piece of calico, which I wore tied

round my body. Nor did I even indicate the locality described by Duncumbe—I was a little too long-headed for that—but I told him that Duncumbe and his companions had evidently discovered gold in large quantities, as the box found on the raft proved that.

Yasotoaró was very thoughtful after he had heard my story, and he showed that blood was thicker than water by expressing the strongest amount of sympathy with us, and railing against the Government that had treated us so shamefully.

"There has long been a tradition," he said, "current amongst the Indians that, away to the east, in the Oriente, and near the great river Napo, is a valley literally glittering with gold. I have been very little to the east myself, for in my hunting days I used to go south to the frontiers of Peru, or north to the frontiers of New Granada." He was thoughtful again for some time, and seemed to sink into a dreamy reverie. Then suddenly, with a start, he exclaimed, "By Heaven, what you have told me stirs my blood until it courses through my veins with the strength of youthful ambition. I am an old man, but I have strength left yet, and the hunter's keenness of scent, and I would——" Here he stopped abruptly short, and, looking keenly at me for some moments, added, "Tut, I am talking foolishly.

You are a convict found guilty of an offence against the laws of Ecuador, of which I am a naturalized subject, and I must speak to you no more."

Without another word he walked away, leaving me standing there in astonishment until I began to think he was a bit cracked.

CHAPTER XII.

"FIRE! FIRE!"

It was the second day after my interview with Yasotoaró that I said to Nausiscaa, who had come as usual to pay us her daily visit and bring us some fruit, and of course to do a little love-making with Barney on the quiet—

"Nausiscaa, that old—what's his name?—Yasotoaró—is a bit gone in the upper regions, isn't he?" and I tapped my forehead, to better convey to her my meaning.

She opened her beautiful eyes in amazement; then, placing her finger on her lips, whispered—

"Hush! Talk not like that. He is one of the cleverest men in Ecuador, and will be your friend. He was speaking to me about you, and between us we shall arrange something. He was once a mighty hunter, and much beloved by the Indians, who gave him the name of Yasotoaró. He has great influence

amongst them, and——" She stopped as some one approached, and by a look cautioned me to silence.

I was left to conjecture what the finish of her sentence would have been; but those words, "He has great influence among them" (the Indians), suggested to me a dozen things, in which our freedom was uppermost.

That night Barney set my heart beating faster by saying—

"That darling colleen will be our saviour."

"Whom do you mean?" I asked, being not quite clear as to his meaning.

"Nausiscaa," he answered.

"In what way?" said I.

"She will get us out of this infernal place."

"How?" I exclaimed under my breath.

"Hush! be careful. Oi don't know yet; but she and old Yasotoaró will do the trick."

From that moment the man whom I had thought was cracked became a hero in my eyes. He came to visit us next day, but he only talked about the most commonplace things. He was a grand and picturesque old man. He had a powerful frame, with a massive head set on a bull-like neck. His face, which was burnt copper colour, was strongly marked, indicating great decision of character. His deep-set

eyes, overhung by his white brows, that looked like patches of snow, were full of fire and keenness. His long, white hair, that hung about his neck, gave him a patriarchal appearance, while his voice was full, round, and mellow, and he spoke with that deliberateness peculiar to men who think deeply and do not act upon mere impulse.

Just before he went away, he came close to me, and slipped a little roll of paper into my hand, whispering hurriedly—

"Caution, as you value your life. Hide that paper, and read it when chance occurs, then destroy every vestige of it."

I need not try to explain what my feelings were as I heard these words. They can be better guessed than described. I slipped the roll of paper up my sleeve, and my whole body was in a thrill with suppressed nervous excitement.

In spite of the liberty that was accorded us in the prison, we were pretty closely watched, so that I got no chance of reading the paper the old man had given me until daybreak the following morning, just as the light was streaming in through the narrow openings of the wall in the long, narrow sort of passage where we all slept in a row on a shelf that was affixed to the wall. My position happened to be at the end of the

shelf, and just under one of the openings—there were no windows—and as I lay on my side I pulled out the paper, and taking care not to let the sentries, who patrolled up and down, see what I was doing, I began to read. The paper was a long strip; the writing was small and cramped, and some of the words were difficult to make out, as the writer misspelt them. However, the following is the gist of it:—

"I am too old to crave for wealth now, but we will seek that wonderful valley of gold together. The story you have told me has thrilled me once more with a desire for adventure, and, though I shall die soon, I cannot resist that desire. Besides, you are my countrymen, and the punishment you have to endure is out of all proportion to the offence you have committed. Your freedom, however, can, I fear, only be gained by bloodshed, for you will have to fight. I have power over the Indians, and will stir them into a revolt. The prison will be attacked, and, if the plot succeeds, you will be set at liberty. Watch and wait, however, and be guided by Nausiscaa. Remember above all things to be cautious, for should the conspiracy be suspected they would not hesitate to take you all out and shoot you immediately."

That was all; but it was enough for the purpose. I thoroughly grasped the idea, and was prepared to

do any amount of fighting and run any risk for freedom. A little later when we were roused out for the day, and while we were taking our after-breakfast smoke, I burned that strip of paper to light my pipe with. I had no fear of forgetting its contents, even if I had not been so vitally interested in it, for Nature had endowed me with a remarkable memory in that respect, and many days after I had read a book I could repeat whole pages of it.

In the course of the day I managed to impart Yasotoaró's communication to my comrades, and they expressed my sentiment, that they were ready to do any amount of fighting.

Some days passed before the subject was mentioned again. Then Nausiscaa told Barney that many of the Indian guards about the prison, and who were practically slaves, had been bought over by Yasotoaró, who was also secretly organizing a little band of devoted followers outside. When the plot was fully matured, an hour would be fixed, and an alarm of fire would be raised in the prison by those in the conspiracy. During the confusion that would ensue consequent on this the conspirators would throw open the gates, knives would be placed in our hands, and we should have to make a bold sweep for liberty. Outside, Yasotoaró and his little band would be wait-

ing to receive us, and if we succeeded in getting free we were at once to take to the forests under the guidance of the old hunter."

"And about yourself?" Barney had exclaimed to her, as she told him the plot. "Bedad! Oi wud rather be in prison all my life wid you than have liberty widout you."

"Why, darling," she had answered, "you don't suppose I am going to part from you? I can handle a gun and a machete as well as many men, and I shall be prepared to take my part in the rescue."

The admiration that we all felt for this noble and brave girl could not be expressed, and I am sure there was not one of us who would not have laid his life down to serve her or save her from danger.

For the next day or two we were in a state of suppressed feverish excitement at the prospect of release. We knew, of course, that all turned upon the hazard of a die, and that, in spite of the efforts made on our behalf, failure might be the result, and then it was almost certain that we should be executed, or subjected to such labour that would make living worse than death. I had heard incidentally that prisoners frustrated in an attempt to escape were either summarily executed, or sentenced to perpetual labour in the mines without any break, the consquence being

that they died very dreadful and rapid deaths. It will thus be readily understood that we were in a state of excitement, which took us all our time to keep from betraying itself, and that we fluctuated between hope and despair. Nausiscaa, however, encouraged us in every possible way. She was bright, hopeful, and cheery, and would not admit the possibility of failure.

"I am risking all for your dear sake," she said to Barney, "and shall go no more to Quito. I have often longed for the wild, free life of the forests. I was born, as I have told you, in the east, and I have vivid recollections of my childhood's days spent by the great river that flows on and on, as I have heard, for thousands of miles. I long to go back to my native place, and, if you are with me, love will make it a paradise."

Barney, who was a simple, frank, open-hearted fellow, without an atom of guile in his nature, repeated her sweet talk to me, and asked me what he should do; and I did not hesitate to tell him that should he succeed in getting free it was his duty to protect that dear girl at the risk and peril of his life, and to go with her to the strange and mysterious region where she had spent her early years.

He was much affected when I thus spoke to him, and, grasping my hand with a warm, nervous grasp,

while tears of emotion came into his honest blue eyes, he said in husky tones—

"Feldje, do ye think Oi should drame of deserting that angel? No; be the Powers and all the saints in heaven, Oi swear to stick to her till Oi'm dead, and the first priest Oi mate Oi'll ax him to marry us."

There was no doubt about his earnestness, and I knew that the prize he had to fight for would put a giant's might into his already strong arm.

As the date for our return to the mines was now close at hand, it became necessary that we should make our bid for freedom without further delay. We ourselves were, of course, powerless to advance the preparations in any way. We were entirely dependent upon Nausiscaa and Yasotoaró. But we could not have had two stauncher and braver allies; and though they could not command success, they did all they could to deserve it.

At length the hour for the attempt was fixed, and Nausiscaa told us that exactly as the bell of the prison clock tolled midnight an alarm of fire would be raised. During the confusion consequent on this alarm the friends of Yasotoaró inside would throw open the prison gate. Outside the old hunter and his followers would be lying in ambush, and as soon as the gate was open they would make a rush to gain

entrance. We on our part were to be on the alert, and the moment we heard the alarm we were to rush towards the gate. If the party outside succeeded in reaching us, they would hand us machetes, or sword-knives, so that we might not only defend ourselves, but cut our way out.

These preliminaries settled and arranged, we waited impatiently for the hour that was big with our fate. The prisoners had to retire as soon as it was dark; that was at this time about nine o'clock, so that we had three hours to get over before the supreme moment. On this particular night it seemed as if Nature had ranged herself on our side. The heat during the day had been terrific. The air in the courtyard even was like the inside of a baker's oven, and the result was every one suffered from drowsiness and languor; every one, I should say, but ourselves, and we were kept up and stimulated by the prospect of freedom. Of course, there was no certainty we should succeed, but it was something to be inspired with hope.

When the sun went down, the sky was like a sheet of lead, crossed near the horizon with bars of blood-red clouds, which, every one said, indicated a gathering storm. The night brought us no diminution of the heat—another storm sign—and so suffocating was

the atmosphere that the prisoners were permitted to carry their sleeping-mats to a verandah that ran along one side of the courtyard. Nothing could have been more favourable to our purpose than this, and my mates and I lay with palpitating hearts, mentally counting the minutes, which seemed to us interminably long. We heard half-past eleven strike, and almost immediately after there was a glare of lightning, which was awful, and then succeeded a crash of thunder that literally shook the building. When this had died away there was a silence as of death in the atmosphere. This is one of the peculiarities of thunderstorms in this region. There is a flash and a crash, and then silence for some little time. The next stage is a mighty rush, as the rain in one great flood tumbles out of the heavens. There are no preliminary drops, as in this country. It is as if some upholding force has been removed, and the water tumbles out like a mill-dam when the sluices are opened. The roar of this rain was astounding, and very soon there mingled with it the incessant peals of thunder, while the lightning was awful in its terrific grandeur.

The raging of this fierce storm disturbed the slumbers of all the prisoners, and my mates and I made it an excuse for rising up and keeping together,

ready for the rush when the signal was given. It seemed to us as if the time would never pass. We spoke no word to each other, with the exception of once, when I whispered—

"Hold together, boys, and remember it's freedom or death."

"Ay, ay," was the muttered response from between set teeth, showing the stern resolution of each speaker.

At length, even above the hideous roar of the storm, we caught the sounds of the bell proclaiming midnight, and immediately after a stentorian voice rang out the words—

"Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.

It was a somewhat remarkable coincidence that almost simultaneously with that cry of fire there was a burst of lightning all over the heavens, which so illuminated and imparted such a glare to everything that the place really seemed to be on fire. I say that the lightning *burst* from the heavens, because that is the only way to describe these electrical displays in tropical regions. It seems, in fact, and perhaps is actually so, that the lightning leaps from horizon to horizon in one tremendous sheet of blue flame, while through this sheet tear long jagged ribbons of red light, often seeming to proceed from a common centre, and radiating outward in appalling forks, mingled with balls that in turn rend and shatter, sending out steel-blue tongues. Now, if the imagination can picture such an electrical display as this, happening simultaneously, and lasting for several

seconds, or occurring so frequently as to have the appearance of being incessant, some idea of a tropical thunderstorm may be realized. To experience one of these storms in a dense jungle is to be a witness to one of the most awfully weird and awe-inspiring effects of nature that the world has to show. At such times the effect of the lightning amongst the trees is truly marvellous; while, to add to the terror, the giants of the forest crash down at such a rate that no spot is safe. Then, again, the vibrations of the thunder-crashes impart a peculiar thrill to the ground, which begets in one a sense of insecurity, so that, apart from the nervous terror, more or less marked according to the individual, inspired by the thunder and lightning and the rain, which pours down as if coming from conduit pipes, there is that vague idea that the earth beneath your feet will open and swallow you up. Nor is man the only one whose sensations are affected by storms of this kind. Monkeys are peculiarly sensitive, and will huddle together and moan piteously. Lions and tigers will crouch away beneath the thickest undergrowth, while snakes display peculiar restlessness, moving their heads backwards and forwards, lashing out their tails, or coiling and uncoiling themselves with spasmodic jerks. In the case of alligators and crocodiles basking on a

river bank, as soon as ever a thunderstorm breaks they disappear into the water, as though they thought the bottom of a river the safest place at such a time.

However, this is somewhat of a digression. As that cry of fire rang on the night air, and the blaze of lightning searched out every angle and recess of the building, and threw into bold chiarobscuro relief the figures of men in various attitudes of disorder, it was well calculated to impress all but ourselves with a sense of impending calamity and threatening danger. The majority of the natives of Ecuador are not conspicuous either for presence of mind or cool courage in moments of sudden alarm; in fact, they lose their heads, I think, quicker than most races that I have come in contact with, for not only are they very superstitious, but somewhat low in reasoning power. There is little doubt that Yasotoaró had these qualities in his mind when he decided to raise the cry of fire at the solemn hour of midnight. And so well did the storm play into our hands that the effect was infinitely more marked than we had anticipated.

In a few moments the whole place seemed to be in one bedlam-like uproar; and, to add to the terror and confusion, some of the soldiers or guards in their

alarm fired off their muskets in the air. Keeping together, shoulder to shoulder, my mates and I made a rush for the gate, and as we tore across the court-yard Barney came in contact with one of the guard, who was sent sprawling by the impact, and with a wild swoop, like the swoop of an eagle darting to seize its prey, the Irishman threw himself on the Ecuadorian, and snatched away his musket.

"Hurrah, boys!" he shouted, as he seized the barrel and twirled the gun dexterously about his head, "Oi've got a shillelagh now, and, be the powers, Oi'll make some of their heads feel its weight."

When we reached the gate, we found a struggling mass of human beings. The guards had already realized that an attempt at escape was being made, and they were trying to bar the way. The difficulty, of course, for us was to distinguish between friend and foe. The lightning-flashes showed us men locked together in fierce embrace, but one figure was conspicuous over all the rest. He was a big, powerful man, whom, from his figure, we at once recognized as the commandant. He had his back to the gate, and was slashing about him furiously with one of the formidable sword-knives in use in this part of the world. It wanted no time to consider whether this man was our foe or not. It was only too evident that

he was our enemy, and equally evident that he was intent on barring the outward progress of any one, and of preventing the gate being opened. Barney was next to me, and I saw, as it were in a dream, that he seized the gun that he had been using as a club in the proper way—that is, he grasped it by the stock—and took aim; then there was a report and flash, and the commandant swayed, reeled for a moment, then threw up his arms, and fell forward on his face mortally wounded or shot dead. Then men, evidently our friends, with fierce cries and yells, threw themselves on his prostrate body, and dragged it away, and others, again, opened the gate. Breasting our way through the surging sea of humanity, we forced ourselves into the outer space between the buildings and the surrounding wall. We found a crowd of fighting men in this space before the main gateway, and it was evident that our friends had got in. Barney at once clubbed his gun, and brought its butt down with crushing effect on the head of any one he could get at who wore the uniform of the prison guard. Our mates, too, struck out with their fists in true British fashion, Jim Smith being particularly effective. Then I heard a voice crying out in English—

"Men rally here!—rally here!"

I at once recognized the speaker as Yasotoaró, and saw him struggling in a group of men.

"To the rescue, Barney!" I shouted, and sprang forward myself, but was instantly felled by a blow on the head, from whom I know not. I jumped to my feet almost instantly, and at that moment some one thrust a sword-knife into my hand. The scene now was demoniacal. The fierce shouts of the men, the clash of arms, the groans of the wounded, the tramping of feet, the crashing of the thunder, the rush and hiss of the rain, the flare of the lightning, and the hideous clamouring of the iron-tongued alarm-bell on the prison roof made up a stirring act such as no one who took part in it was likely ever to forget.

Of course it must not be supposed that the other prisoners remained inactive during this thrilling little drama. They must have very speedily realized what it all meant, and they made a bid for freedom on their own account. However, we could not give any attention to them. I struggled forward to where I saw Yasotoaró, and, turning round to see if my mates were following me, I was horrified to observe poor Nixon reel and fall, his skull split open by a blow from a sword-knife wielded by one of the guard. Forgetting myself and everything else for the moment, I made one wild spring at the guard, and with a

mighty sweep of my knife, I believe I nearly severed his head from his body. Then I tried to raise Nixon; but he was an inert mass, and I feel sure was dead, or nearly so.

This incident had separated me from my companions, and I found myself surrounded with guards. But I seemed to be suddenly endowed with almost superhuman strength. The desperate nature of my position, and the quick, sudden thought that I might after all be cut off from blessed freedom, made a devil of me, and with my machete I slashed around me, and found that this short native sword-knife was a tremendously powerful and effective weapon. Hearing my name called, I cut my way towards the spot where the voice came from, and once more found myself amongst my companions, with Yasotoaró at their head. Not only was the old man's prowess amazing, but it was evident that he had all the qualities of a general.

For the next few minutes it was a hell of wrath; a swirling, panting, heaving, struggling mass of passionate men; the ground encumbered with dead and dying, and slippery with blood, and to the din was added the clash of steel, the firing of muskets, the groans and imprecations of the fighters, and the only light we had was the fierce glare of the lightning.

But what a light! There was no break in it, flash succeeded flash with such rapidity. Then somehow —I am sure I don't know how—I found myself clear of the prison buildings, and shoulder to shoulder with Yasotoaró.

"Where are your comrades?" he said. "Shout to them."

And I did shout, and they responded; and I saw Barney struggle toward me supporting Macpherson, the carpenter, who was wounded.

"It's a' richt," said Chips, as cheerily as he could, although he spoke with difficulty, for he was weak and short of breath. "Dinna fash yersel' aboot me. I'm a' richt. I just got a wee bit prod wi' ane o' thae cheese-knives, but it's no muckle."

There was no time to ask questions, nor to ascertain to what extent Chips was wounded. Yasotoaró was rallying his men, and we were clear of the prison.

"Now," said the old hunter, "the worst is passed, and we can hold our own for a time. But there is not a moment to be lost. All the soldiers in the town will assemble directly, and we must make good our escape."

A hurried glance assured me that all my mates were there with the exception of poor Nixon, who had gone to a better world, where the fierce passions of

men prevail not. Behind us was the prison, now lighted up with the glare of torches, and there was still a struggling mass about the gateway. We also heard the roll of drums and the blare of trumpets as the soldiers in the barracks were called to arms.

Not more than ten minutes, if so much, had elapsed from the cry of fire to now, when we stood drenched to the skin with rain, panting with exhaustion with the short fierce encounter, but free. Besides ourselves and Yasotoaró, we had some fourteen or fifteen friends, all Indians. Placing himself at the head of our little party, the grand old chief exclaimed, first in Indian and then in English—

"Now, then, quick; follow me, and be silent and cautious."

We sailors were all barefoot, and the chief and the Indians wore the alparagates, so that there was no sound from our footfalls, and at a tremendous pace, and almost as silently as shadows, we descended a steep street that was lined with straggling houses. In some of them lights were moving about, showing that the people had been aroused.

In a brief space we had cleared the town and gained the edge of a forest. Then Barney stopped, and, addressing Yasotoaró, said—

"Captain, Oi go no further."

"Why?" asked the chief, in amazement.

"Because I cannot lave that dear little woman Nausiscaa behind. Oi shall go back to seek her."

"Tut, you fool," answered Yasotoaró emphatically and petulantly. "She is not behind, but before. She is waiting at a rendezvous, and you will see her in less than ten minutes if you step out."

And Barney did step out. He set the pace, and that would have defied any ordinary walker to overtake us. Gradually the roar and shouts in the town died away as we pressed forward in single file, our white-haired chief leading. The storm, too, was ceasing. The lightning had become fitful; the rain had slackened. About ten minutes of hard going brought us to the banks of a narrow river that flowed through the forest, and we saw seven figures and also some mules. In another moment a woman sprang forward. It was Nausiscaa. By a lover's instinct, she and Barney came together, and were clasped in each other's arms.

Six other Indians formed her escort, and there were six mules, four of them heavily laden and two without loads, they being intended to relieve the others at intervals.

"Now," said Yasotoaró, "we haven't a moment to

lose. The heavy rain will have swollen the river, and already the ford will be more than breast-high. The waters are rising, too, but that is in our favour. It will put a barrier between us and our enemies."

He led the way to the ford, and plunged in. Then he shouted—

"You must all swim. The water is deep on the ford."

We did swim like a lot of water-rats, including Nausiscaa, who kept close beside her lover; and the Indians brought the mules over in splendid style. When we were all across, our chief mustered us, and said—

"We must keep on for another two hours, then we shall be safe."

On we went through the forest, the old man picking the way with unerring accuracy and the true instincts of the hunter. At length, daylight broke, and after two hours' marching we came to a wide open belt of land on the margin of a swamp. Then Yasotoaró called a halt, and told us we could rest and have breakfast. One of the mules was packed with firearms and ammunition, which the old man served out amongst us who had none. The loads of the other mules consisted of, besides the personal effects of Yasotoaró, pickaxes, shovels, crowbars, and other

implements of a like kind, and a large supply of dried provisions.

As I saw that the expedition was thus fully equipped—thanks to the thoughtfulness of the old man—I felt that our being taken prisoners was to our advantage. Having made a fire and prepared some yerba maté, we enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast, and then, having set watches, we lay down for an hour or two of much-needed sleep after our night of stirring adventure.

CHAPTER XIV.

WE START FOR THE ORIENTE.

When we awoke we found that Chips was suffering very much from the wound he had received. The brave fellow had kept up wonderfully, and had borne his pain without flinching. He had been wounded in the left shoulder by a sword-cut that had gone right down to the bone, and made a very ugly gash, which had bled tremendously. He had slept a little after the great exertion he had endured, but he woke up with the extreme pain, and he looked so ghastly white that I was quite frightened. The blow that I myself had received on the head, and which must have been inflicted with either a stick or a gun clubbed, had made a very ugly crack, which was exceedingly sore and painful; but I forgot all about it in the alarm which Sandy Macpherson's appearance caused me. I was relieved, however, when Yasotoaró examined the wound, and, having washed it well, pronounced it not

dangerous; and an Indian, to whom he gave some instructions, started off into the forest, returning in about twenty minutes with his arms full of what looked like a kind of grass. Yasotoaró told me that this was known as *yerba luisa*, or lemon grass, and that it was a most powerful tonic and stimulant. He said that the natives would sometimes travel for days with little or no other nutriment than that afforded by a decoction of this herb. The old man then cut a quantity of it into pieces, which he placed in a large pannikin of water on the hot ashes, and allowed it to boil for about a quarter of an hour.

In the mean time some of the other Indians had got a quantity of large leaves that they bruised with a stone, and they yielded a thick, viscid, milky sort of substance that was like an ointment. This was collected with a knife, and spread on a strip of rag, which was applied to the wound in the carpenter's shoulder, the plaster being cleverly and ingeniously strapped on with long blades of a very tough fibrous grass that grew profusely in the forests. The yerba decoction then being ready, a large tin cup full of it was given to Chips, and very soon I saw the colour come back to his face, his eyes brighten up, and he declared that he felt all right. My wound was next dressed, and I drank a quantity of the yerba. It had

a most agreeable taste, and was a very palatable drink. Apart from that, its effects on the system were little short of marvellous. It produced a delightful sense of exhilaration, with a feeling of strength and power, that would have to be experienced to be properly understood.

The doctoring being finished, some of the Indians were sent to a river which was not far off to catch some *damitas*, a small and delicious fish that swarms in all the Ecuadorian rivers. The way the natives catch them is very remarkable. They take a handful of mashka, and going to the edge of the stream sprinkle the maskha on the water very gradually. The damitas are very fond of this meal, and come up to eat it. Then with his disengaged hand the fisher jerks them out of the water on to the bank. The rapidity with which this movement is executed defies the eye of an onlooker to detect it.

Very soon we had quantities of these fish gutted and cleaned and broiling over the hot ashes, and they made us a most sumptuous feed.

As soon as the great business of eating was over, Yasotoaró discussed our future plans, and, seeing how well and faithfully he had served us, I had no hesitation in placing all Peter Duncumbe's papers before him. Had I been searched when taken prisoner, there

is little doubt these precious documents would have been confiscated. But, fortunately, that was not the case, and I had preserved them with the greatest care.

Yasotoaró studied these papers with the deepest and most absorbing interest. He lay stretched out on the grass, his chin resting on his hands, and the papers before him.

"Well, mate, what's your opinion?" I asked, after he had been silent for a long time.

He rose to a sitting position, and said, "This puzzles me," and he read the following passage:—

"You land at the pillars near the Bear's Head. South half a furlong. North to Quito. East and by south. Cross the Ica, Cotopaxi bearing due west. A furlong north. Strike Coqueta, following south and east. At the fork, towards the rising sun."

Now, I must confess that when I first read that passage when we were on the raft I was a little puzzled myself, for of course I had no knowledge of the topography or geography of the country. This much, however, was clear: "You land at the pillars near the Bear's Head" meant that that was a part of the shore where a landing was to be effected, and I asked Yasotoaró if he knew the part of the coast thus described.

"No," he answered, "but the cliffs and rocks all along the coast are very fantastic, and may be likened to almost anything. Peter Duncumbe's fanciful imagination perhaps had likened some of the rocks to pillars and another part to a bear's head."

This struck me as being an exceedingly feasible explanation, and it was evident that "south half a furlong" meant that, having landed, one must bear south for about a mile and a half, then strike inland, and proceed to Quito, which Duncumbe seemed to take as a starting-point. From Quito the course he set was east and by south. Old Yasotoaró read that part over several times. Then he called the Indians round him, and conversed with them for some time, and presently he spoke thus—

"The Ica is the Indian name for the great river Putumayo, which has its rise far up in the mighty mountains near the frontier of Granada. The men say it is far from here, and will take us two moons to reach it. The river Coqueta, or Japura, is far, far to the east, and flows almost parallel to the Putumayo, but they know nothing about it, further than that they have heard that the eastern region is a terrible country, and peopled by savage hordes of Indians. Ah! here is Nausiscaa," he exclaimed. "Let us see what she has got to say."

Nausiscaa and Barney had disappeared for some time in the forest, and there is no doubt they had been billing and cooing to their heart's content. Yasotoaró read the manuscript to her, and she listened attentively, saying at last—

"I remember to have heard that the Ica and Coqueta are mighty rivers flowing down to the Amazon. The country through which they flow is a vast and impenetrable forest, filled with wild beasts and monstrous serpents and savage races of men, who are unsurpassed for treachery and cruelty. White men cannot penetrate these dreadful regions."

Yasotoaró smiled as he answered, "Hast thou not gathered, child of the sun, that Peter Duncumbe and his companions penetrated them, and they were white men?"

"Ah, true," she exclaimed, "and where they went we can go. Can we not, Barney?"

"Bedad, we can," answered Barney, as, unable to withstand her bewitching manner, he imprinted a kiss on her pretty mouth.

"Truly thou art a daughter of the forest, and thou hast a lion's heart," said Yasotoaró, proudly. "The wild beasts, the monstrous serpents, and the savage men we must overcome." Here he spoke with enthusiasm, and his eyes kindled with fire as he added

proudly, "I am an old hunter. My thews and sinews have still some strength left, and my aim as a shooter has ever been deadly. Come, let us be moving. Our enemies are behind us, and before us lie the unknown wilds of the Oriente, but somewhere in their dark and mysterious depths is the wonderful El Dorado, this land of gold for which Peter Duncumbe and his companions sacrificed their lives. I care not for gold, but the thought of the dangers in our path and to be overcome thrills me once again with youthful delight."

He rose and shook himself like a grand old lion—the king of the forest tribes—that girds its strength up for the pursuit of prey. All hands now turned to and helped to gather up the things and reload the mules. We wanted Nausiscaa to ride one of the spare animals, but she laughed the idea to scorn.

"No," she said proudly, "I will go on foot through my native wilds, and side by side with him who is part of my life."

She looked really splendid as she spoke, and assumed a pose that was perfect in its natural grace. She wore a bright-coloured handkerchief twisted most artistically round her shapely head, and her magnificent raven hair fell unfettered about her shoulders. She was dressed in a short skirt that buttoned across

the chest somewhat like a sailor's reefing-jacket, and descended a little way below the knees. The rest of her dress consisted of highly ornamented gaiters that fastened at the ankles and the indispensable alparagates. She was armed with a musket, which she carried hunterwise, slung across her back, while at her side dangled one of the formidable sword-knives in a protecting sheath made of rough hide.

Young and lightly built though she was, there nevertheless was something noble and grand in her bearing, and she looked as though she was quite capable of defending herself if needs be, and as if she might prove a by no means contemptible foe. Her loose-fitting and picturesque costume allowed full freedom to the limbs, and every movement of her body was grace itself.

I had at first had some misgivings about her accompanying us, fearing that she might prove too frail for so arduous a journey. But now, as I gazed at her, all those misgivings gave place to genuine admiration, and a feeling that was little short of a conviction that her powers of endurance would be all but equal to our own, while as for her courage, I would not have dared to question that. Besides, with such a staunch and dauntless fellow as Barney Fagan to protect her, what was there to fear? And so,

having got into marching order, we turned our faces towards that unknown and mysterious east; and, breathing the sweet air of liberty, we set off in search of El Dorado. Our hearts were light, but had we known what lay before us our feelings would in all probability have been of a very different kind.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE DEPTHS OF THE FOREST.

We had no map; in fact, no map of the Oriente, so far as I know, had ever been published.* But

* Mr. Feldje is practically correct in this statement. In his time, none of the maps in existence gave any details of the vast eastern portion of Ecuador. The people on the coast and the slopes of the great mountains did, and do, refer to the vast Province del Oriente as a sort of *Inferno*, and all who entered it left hope behind. The vast primeval forests, which are shrouded in perpetual gloom owing to their density, and swarm with the most deadly reptiles and savage beasts, have been regarded with horror by the people, and the Ecuadorian Government has never made any serious attempt to explore these virgin regions. A recent writer, speaking of this very circumstance, says, "The apathy and ignorance of the Government with respect to its Province del Oriente is so complete that it can cause no surprise if encroachments gain upon their territory from year to year, and the rich and gold-teeming province becomes more and more lost to them." Even at the present day maps fail to give any accurate details of this region of mystery. Such travellers as have penetrated eastward agree in describing the country as wonderful and magnificent. The great rivers, such as the Napo, which is also in one part called the Coca, the Putumayo, the Jupura, which, flowing from the north and west, roll their course for thousands of miles until they reach the head-waters of the Amazon, are practically unexplored; but it is known that they present to the adventurous traveller scenes of magnificence unsurpassed in the world. The first to enter the region of which we have any definite account was Gonzalo Pizarro, when he set

Yasotoaró had brought a compass, which was invaluable in these trackless wilds. He had also provided himself with a quantity of coarse cloth—lienzo as it was called, beads of bright colours, some small knives, a few rolls of copper wire, about a couple of dozen small axes, a bag of assorted nails, and various other odds and ends—these things being intended for trade with the Indians, and to propitiate them when they showed hostile intent. This forethought on the part of the old man promised well for our adventure, and, realizing as we did now the nature of the journey that lay before us, we could not help coming to the conclusion that, had we been alone and unarmed and unprovided, nothing short of a mad fascination could have induced us to go forward. Nor could we any longer feel the slightest surpise that the whole of Peter Duncumbe's party had perished.

The earnestness with which Yasotoaró had entered upon the adventure was proved by his having staked his all on the hazard of the die. He had cut himself

out from Peru on his great scheme of conquest about the year 1541. He is said to have descended the Coca and Napo to its disembouchure in the Marañon, which is the head of the Amazon. But so arduous was the journey, and the expedition was beset with so many dangers and difficulties, that four thousand of the Indians attached to it perished, together with two hundred and twenty of the Spaniards, and all the dogs and mules that accompanied the little army. Many travellers since then who have ventured to enter the Oriente have never been heard of more.—THE AUTHOR.

adrift entirely from Azogues, had realized all his belongings as far as he could, and had commenced a journey, the end of which it was impossible for any man to foretell. But the spirit of adventure and the hunter's instincts were so strong in him that, old as he was, he had been aroused to enthusiasm, and so had thrown his lot in with ours. To return now was impossible for him, because he would have been instantly shot for the part he had taken in the revolt. He told us that he had spent a considerable sum of money in bribing the guards of the prison to aid us in our escape. I need scarcely say that this grand old man won our very highest esteem, and there was not one of us who would not have risked his life to protect him.

We did not make any great progress that day, for we had literally to cut a path through the dense forest. The tangle of undergrowth was most extraordinary, and required not only great exertions but considerable skill to clear it. Our Indians served us in good stead in this respect, and the wonder to me was that they managed to escape being bitten by numberless serpents of the most deadly kind which we disturbed, many of them lashing themselves into fury as their peaceful and secret haunts were thus invaded.

As the daylight commenced to fade away, we came

to a halt on the margin of an extensive swamp, which was clear of trees, but in parts covered with patches of a peculiar grass that was singularly like wire, and the edges of which were so sharp that they cut the unprotected hand as a knife would have done. This grass grew to the height of about four feet, and as the wind swayed it backwards and forwards it emitted a sound that was exactly like wire jangling together. The sound was not harsh; on the contrary, there was a pleasant, dreamy, monotonous rhythm about it.

The first thing we did on halting was to clear the ground with our axes and machetes for a considerable space; then the natives cut a quantity of palm-leaves for bedding, and we white men collected a stock of wood for fires, which we soon had burning in a large circle, the object of this being to keep the snakes and wild animals off. With astounding ingenuity and rapidity the natives next rigged up tents of palm boughs, and we were very soon as snug as could be.

The supper being ended, nearly every one soon fell asleep, being thoroughly wearied out with the arduous day's labour. I could not sleep, however; I don't know why. I was peculiarly restless, and so sat up and smoked. It was a picturesque scene, as the smouldering fires brought into relief the palm-bough tents, and the bright glow, contrasting with the dark,

gloomy forest, from which issued a concert of strange sounds, and yet these sounds seemed to accord so well with the darkness that they rather emphasized than broke the solemn stillness.

Nausiscaa's tent had been placed in the very centre of the circle, so that the others formed a barrier, as it were, around hers. Presently, to my astonishment, I saw her emerge from her little shelter, and seat herself on a block of wood, where she sat staring into one of the fires, her chin resting on her hands. She had not noticed me, and I thought of calling to her, but she presented such a striking picture, having regard to the surroundings and circumstances, that I could not help but gaze at her with feelings of intense admiration—that is, admiration for her faithfulness to us and her splendid courage. I and the carpenter occupied a little tent together. I had requested that he might be my companion, so that I might attend him if he wanted anything; but fortunately the Indian remedies applied to his wound had been so beneficial that he had suffered little or no inconvenience during the day, and now was sleeping soundly. In another tent Barney and Jim Smith slept, while Yasotoaró had a tent to himself. The Indians had dispersed themselves about, while the mules were tethered to wooden pegs driven into the ground, and the baggage

was piled up in a heap close to Nausiscaa's tent. Soon after she had taken up her position on the block of wood Barney made his appearance, and going to her abruptly she was so startled that she sprang to her feet, and grasped the handle of her machete, which still hung at her side. In fact, both she and Yasotoaró had cautioned us against being out of reach of our arms, as we never knew the moment when we might want them, either to defend ourselves against the jaguars, which at times were most daring in their attacks, and would even spring into an encampment and endeavour to carry off one of the sleepers; or the wild Indians, who were said to be even fiercer and more bloodthirsty than the jaguars. However, at this time we were yet a long way from the Indian territory, though these children of the forest roamed about in little groups, and often came to the very verge of civilization. For the moment, I had forgotten that Barney had undertaken to keep watch and ward for the first four hours, and he, like myself, had been sitting at the entrance of his leafy dwelling smoking, although I had not noticed him. His being on watch accounted for his observing Nausiscaa.

"Jewel of me sowl," he exclaimed, "why are ye not slaping?"

"Because I've been thinking of you," she answered, with a long-drawn sigh of relief and joy as she felt her lover's arms around her. "But why did you startle me like that?"

"Startle ye! Bad luck to me clumsiness, did I do that?" answered Barney. "Shure I didn't intend to do it."

"Of course you did not. But, never mind; I am so happy when you are near me. But, ah, Barney, will you always love me? Will you always remain with me?"

"By St. Patrick, I will," cried Barney, with great earnestness, as he laid his big hand on his heart, which I knew was as honest a heart as ever beat in man's breast.

"St. Patrick!" echoed the wondering girl, as she turned her dark eyes inquiringly up to his face. "Who is St. Patrick, beloved?"

"The greatest saint that ever lived in Oireland, me swatest of women. He banished all the frogs, and the toads, and snakes, and other varmin, and then he was taken up to heaven in a chariot of rale fire."

"La!" exclaimed Nausiscaa, in utter amazement; while, as for myself, I almost roared with laughter at the way Barney's theological teachings had got mixed up. I knew that he was professedly a Roman Catholic; but, like most sailors, he knew a good deal

more about handing and reefing, and conning and steering, than he did about religion. However, he was a good deal more honest, and faithful, and brave, and true than the majority of people who take every possible opportunity to let you know what immaculate saints they are—that is, in their own estimation at least. "And have you no snakes, and toads, and tapirs, and jaguars, and wild cats, and other things of that kind in your country?" asked Nausiscaa.

"Indade, no; divil a one."

"Oh dear, what a curious place it must be!" she returned. "Why, I shouldn't like to live there. There would be no excitement."

"Begorra! ye wouldn't say that, darlint, if ye were to spend a few hours at Donnybrook Fair, when the dacent boys fall to cracking each other's skulls; or if ye were at a wake, when there are lashings of whisky and baccy in galore. Excitement! shure there's no want of excitement then, I tell ye."

"And whatever is a wake?" she asked, growing more and more astonished.

"Do ye mane to tell me ye don't know what a wake is?" cried Barney, so carried away by his awakened memories that he evidently forgot for a moment that he was in the depths of an Ecuadorian forest and talking to a Creole maiden, who knew

little or nothing of the world beyond her own country. "Why, a wake is when we wake the dead."

"Wake the dead! How can you possibly waken the dead? A dead person can never be wakened again."

Barney was tickled by this, and laughed loudly, and as he threw his strong arms round her and kissed her pretty mouth, he answered—

"I don't mane that we waken the dead up, but, ye see, when a person dies, all the relatives are just broken-hearted, and so they stick lights round the corrups, and drink long life and health to it in whisky and tobacco."

"Long life and health to a corpse in whisky and tobacco!" echoed Nausiscaa, drawing away from him, and looking at him with wonderment and doubt, as if not sure whether he was making fun of her or not.

Barney was evidently aware that he was getting a little mixed and muddled, for he said—

"Well, darlint, I don't know how to explain it to you. Av coorse, we don't drink health and long life to the corrups, but to the spirit."

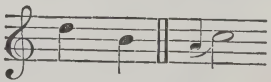
"Ah, how sweet and poetical!" returned Nausiscaa; and Barney drew a sigh of relief, as he felt that at last he had succeeded in satisfying her. "When any one dies amongst my people," she went on, "the relatives assemble, and sing beautiful songs until the

soul of the departed has been wafted over the dark river, and gains the regions of eternal light."

As she spoke, there suddenly resounded through the forest the notes of a flute—at least, it seemed like a flute—and these sounds were, I think, the sweetest, most mellow, and most beautiful notes I ever heard. So perfect were they, so rich and full of soft music, that at such an hour, and in such a place, one might be pardoned for imagining that they represented the plaintive song of some beautiful spirit.

"What is that?" asked Barney, in a breathless and undertone way, as if his superstitious fears had been aroused. At the same time he drew her to him, as if for mutual protection.

"That?" she answered, with a pretty little laugh. "Why, that is the *flautero*." *

* The *flautero* is a little grey bird, common, I believe, in most of the forests of South America. Its song is the most exquisite thing the feathered world gives us, neither the nightingale nor the bulbul being able to compare with it. The notes, which are perfect in their musical cadence, are singularly rich and soft, resembling the mellowest of flutes, and when heard at night—for in certain seasons of the year it sings at night before the female as she sits on her eggs—it makes an impression that will hardly ever fade from the memory, and its sweet, liquid notes will haunt one for years afterwards. The following represent the key-notes of this truly remarkable bird :—

When the flautero is singing, he is said to dance about in a very extraordinary manner, as if to amuse his consort.

Barney showed his appreciation of the little feathered flautist by listening attentively for some minutes, and then, in a burst of enthusiasm, he said—

"Bedad, I never want to lave a country that has such a wonderful bird as that in it, and such a beautiful creature as you."

Nausiscaa drew a sigh, and let her head fall upon his great chest, and his arms stole around her, till in the dying light of the fire the two figures seemed blended into one, and I remembered no more, for I must at this stage have fallen into a sound sleep.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FIGHT WITH SNAKES.

On the following day when we resumed our journey rain was falling heavily, and it made travelling some thing more than uncomfortable. I was strongly in favour of remaining on our camping ground all day, especially as Chips was suffering a good deal from the pain of his wound, and I myself was not free from pain, although that did not influence my desire to remain. Yasotoaró, however, was strongly opposed to delay, for we were not far enough from Azogues, and it was certain that the authorities would send out Indian scouts and soldiers to scour the forests in search of us, and until we were at least three days' marches further to the east he would not consider we were safe from pursuit.

Although I had profound respect for the dear old man, who seemed capable of giving a deliberate and weighty judgment on any subject he discussed, I

could not help thinking that perhaps he was unnecessarily anxious; and so, wishing to carry my point, I urged that it was not fair to expect Nausiscaa to travel under such wretched conditions.

The moment I had uttered the words I saw that I had made a mistake, and never shall I forget the look of burning indignation that came into Nausiscaa's beautiful face. Her hot southern blood fired up at my unintentional slight on her powers, and as she stood confronting me—every line, every curve, every swell of her superb figure visible beneath the light flowing garb she wore—her dark eyes seemed to sparkle like pieces of polished ebony on which a light had been turned. I thought I had never seen such a perfect picture of womanly grace, beauty, and insulted pride. Unslinging her musket from her shoulder with the rapidity of a practised huntress, she grounded the butt, and, holding the muzzle, her magnificently turned bare arm stretched at full length, she placed her left hand on her heart, and said proudly and scornfully—

"Signor Feldge, think of yourself and not of me. I am a child of the forest, and shrink not from the elements, nor from the unknown dangers that may lie before us. I go onward, even though you remain behind."

She gave me no chance of reply, but, throwing her gun over her shoulder again, she struck into the swamp with rapid steps, taking the entire lead, until Barney made a desperate plunge forward and caught her up.

There was nothing now for it but the little party to follow, and it was the most ticklish bit of travelling it has ever fallen to my lot to experience of that kind. The swamp was full of fallen trees, which may have been lying and rotting there for generations. It was absolutely necessary to keep to these slimy, rotting logs, that swayed and squelched many of them in the most alarming way. A false step would have plunged one into the morass, and in a few moments he would have sunk out of sight and been suffocated. It was therefore necessary to watch every step we took, and preserve our balance as if we were walking on a tight rope. It was marvellous to see how Nausiscaa forged ahead—some strange instinct seemed to guide her; and it was only a little less marvellous how Barney, utterly unused as he was to such travelling, kept beside her. But in his case love was the instinct that enabled him to pick his way and the magnet that drew him on.

At first, an attempt was made to bring the mules through the swamp, but it was found impracticable and dangerous, and some of the Indians took them

back, and said they would try and find a better way. But the liquidity of the swamp was not its only danger, since it literally teemed with reptile life. Snakes of all sizes swarmed, and huge alligators lay so still, and were so black and slimy, that at times we had difficulty in distinguishing them from the black logs. Had any of us stepped by mistake on to the back of one of these hideous monsters it would have been all up with the unfortunate person, for his feet would have slipped off the greasy and repulsive saurian, who would at once have turned and rended him.

Fortunately, however, nothing of this kind took place, and we pursued our risky way for some time without anything happening, until suddenly we were startled by a tremendous hissing, suggestive of the falling of heavy hail amongst the branches of trees. But as there were no trees, and it was not hailing, it was evident the hissing was due to some other cause. Then we saw Barney and Nausiscaa, who were some distance ahead, quickly draw their machetes, and begin to slash furiously at the ground, and next we who were behind, following in single file, beheld a sight that filled us with alarm and horror. We had come upon a nest of snakes, and perhaps I may here venture to explain what "a nest of snakes" means.

In the pairing season, these reptiles in tropical jungles come together, not simply in hundreds and thousands, but literally in tens of thousands. They form themselves into immense solid stacks, their bodies and tails wedged and twisted together, and their heads all projecting outwards. This enormous moving, hissing, slimy mass of reptiles is at once one of the most extraordinary and repulsive sights it is possible for human eyes to behold in the animal world. The whole stack heaves and throbs, and the thousands of heads moving rapidly about at the first sound of danger has a positively fascinating effect on the beholder. At such times as these the reptiles are unusually vicious, and their poison is said to be virulent to a remarkable degree. The traveller, however, has one safeguard should he inadvertently come upon one of these living snake stacks. So firmly and solidly are the reptiles twisted and wedged together that they cannot get free, even supposing they were inclined to do so, which is doubtful. They may therefore be avoided, except those that, being on the extreme outside or top of the stack, will slip to the ground, and ferociously attack the disturber, who must defend himself the best way he can.

This was the position of affairs with Nausiscaa and Barney, and Yasotoaró, realizing what was the matter,

rushed forward, followed as fast as we could go by the rest of us, and soon there was such a slashing and whizzing of the machetes that the hissing of the snakes was almost drowned. It was a strange fight; but our heavy, sharp knives were wielded with a will that gave the scattered battalions of snakes no chance, and scores of them lay on the ooze, gashed and bleeding. I proposed that we should fire several volleys into the stack, but Yasotoaró said that we should go far enough off to only just have the reptiles within range. It was in our favour that the ground was harder hereabout, and we were enabled to trust ourselves to it. So, proceeding for some little distance, we formed ourselves in line, and poured a volley into the snakes. The effect was astounding; the whole mass seemed to swell out, as the enraged creatures inflated their bodies in their struggles to escape. Quickly reloading, we poured in another volley, and still another, and another, until there must have been thousands of dead snakes. Then we continued our journey, feeling a sense of keen satisfaction that we had been able to work such wholesale execution on the most insidious and deadly enemy that the traveller in tropical countries has to encounter. It was quite exciting work while it lasted, and it gave us a foretaste of what we were likely to encounter in this most adventurous journey.

In a little while we had the swamp behind us, and were once more on *terra firma*, and we were thankful to get into the shade of the forest, for in the open we had suffered from the sun, the heat of which had been terrific. It had necessarily taken us a long time to effect the passage of the swamps, and, as we were all fatigued, we called a halt, and drew up on what might be described as a mossy glade, through which flowed a stream of water. Then, while the Indians were busy arranging the camp, we white men, with the exception of Chips, who felt exhausted, started off in different directions in search of the baggage party, which we were fortunate in finding. They told us they had crossed the swamps about a mile and a half to the south of us, and experienced little or no difficulty, as the ground was fairly solid.

Having made our fires, supped, and prepared the beds, the camp retired to rest, I undertaking to keep the first watch.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EXCITING ENCOUNTER.

The night passed without anything occurring to disturb our repose, and the morning broke fine, with a promise of better weather than we had been favoured with for some days. The carpenter, unfortunately, was far from well. The exertion he had undergone, together with the drenching, had caused his wound to inflame a good deal, and it caused him much pain. The Indians, however, dressed it afresh, and gave him a strong decoction of yerba luisa, which seemed to put new life into him, and he declared himself fit for any amount of work. We then breakfasted sumptuously, our repast including a quantity of *tarapots*,* which the natives collected, and which we found delicious. The meal ended, we struck our camp, and got under weigh.

* This is a small palm, which yields a substance remarkably like celery. It is most agreeable to the palate, and is said to be very wholesome. It grows in all the South American forests.

Steering by the compass, we kept an almost true east course, but the forest was so dense and swampy that progress was next to impossible. Some of our Indians, who had been in this neighbourhood before, had counselled us on starting that day to keep more to the north, saying that we should have to cross a pass at a considerable altitude. Yasotoaró, however, did not seem to place much reliance on what they said, and so had set our course; but he frankly confessed at last that it was impracticable, and so we turned north for about two hours, the forest getting sparser as we went. Then, guided by the Indians, we faced north-east and by east, and soon descended into a deep gully, through which brawled a torrent that, though narrow, was deep and strong, and gave us considerable trouble to cross.

A little incident happened here, which caused us all much amusement. Some of the party had already crossed, and we had succeeded in sending the mules over, and luckily without wetting the baggage to any serious degree. We had all shown ourselves anxious to render Nausiscaa assistance, but she had refused it, saying she would cross alone; but she stood at the side of the torrent for some little time, as though she could not make up her mind what to do. Barney was beside her; in fact, he was never many yards

from her now, for each seemed indispensable to the other. While she thus stood, he, by a sudden impulse, as it seemed, suddenly caught her up in his arms as if she had been a mere child, and, without a word, he walked straight into the torrent, and though the water was up to his chest he kept his footing and landed his lady-love on the other side with scarcely so much as the hem of her skirt wet. But Miss Nausiscaa was not pleased, for she felt that she had been placed in a very undignified position. She had struggled with him as he was crossing, but he had kept a firm hold of her, and, as he set her down dry-shod on the bank, he exclaimed, with a laugh—

"Acushla Macree! but ye came well nigh upsetting us both wid your wriggling."

But Nausiscaa, who was a strong-willed and head-strong young lady, was burning with indignation, and her face was scarlet.

"How dare you do such a thing as that?" she cried, as she stamped her foot. Then, unslinging her musket, she flung it on the ground, and with a sudden plunge dived into the water, to the amazement of us all and to the horror of Barney, who exclaimed—

"Mother o' God, the swate colleen is going to drown herself!" and in he went after her.

But her object was not, as Barney thought, to drown herself, but to show him how independent she could be of his assistance. In carrying her across, he had evidently thought, and naturally so, that she was afraid to trust herself to the water; but self-reliance was a strong trait in her character, and she could not bear to have her powers slighted. I myself had already proved that when I had suggested that the bad weather made it unfit for her to travel. Her answer to me then was, "Think of yourself, Signor Feldje, and not of me," and she had then plunged into the swamp with a recklessness that alarmed us; and now Barney had wounded her pride again, and she was evidently bent on teaching him a lesson.

Finding that he had come into the water after her, she swam down the stream with the rapidity of a seal, while Barney floundered after her with no more grace than a pig from his own country would have exhibited. Yasotoaró instantly recognized the situation, and called to the Irishman to come out, telling him that the more he tried to overtake Nausiscaa the faster and further she would go. Barney could not be indifferent to this, and, puffing and snorting like a grampus, he came ashore again, and as he stood there with a woebegone expression of face, and the water streaming from him, he presented such a ludicrous

spectacle that we could not repress our laughter. This angered him, although it was very rarely indeed his temper was ruffled, and, turning upon us sharply, he exclaimed—

"What the divil are yez laughing for, boys? Will yez laugh if that swate creature gets drowned?"

Yasotoaró, preserving his gravity with difficulty, laid his hand on poor Barney's shoulder, and said—

"My dear fellow, do not concern yourself. Nausiscaa is in no more danger of drowning than a fish. You must not thwart her, and remember this, that, like all her race, she is exceedingly proud, and her pride is easily wounded. Do not attempt to treat her as a child, or you will come to grief."

"Begorra, I'm as full of grief this minute as an egg is full of mate," sighed Barney, as he kept his eyes on Nausiscaa, and seemed inclined to follow her again in spite of Yasotoaró's warning.

But he thought better of it, and in a little while the girl, having displayed her powers, and satisfied her wounded pride, came out of the water with all the grace of a fawn. Then, thinking it was better to let the lovers make up this little difference by themselves, we moved on, and commenced to ascend rising ground. And presently, on looking back, I noticed that the lovers had evidently "made it up," for they

were locked in each other's arms, and rubbing their beaks together like two cushat doves.

Our road now became very steep. At first it was over very stony ground and through dripping woods, with the boughs of the trees so interlaced that our axes had to be freely used. But in the course of three or four hours we left the woods behind, and came out on an extensive and grassy slope of exceeding steepness; and by-and-by this gave way to a gorge, and that in turn to most declivitous rocks. All this time we had been toiling upward, and there was now a marked difference in the temperature. After the sultriness of the swampy forests it felt like winter; but the natives told us that we still had a great height to go, and that we should probably pass through snow. We followed a ledge of rocks for a long time, and it was really wonderful how the mules managed to pass along with the packs; in fact, at one part, where the ledge was exceedingly narrow, and the rocks sloped away at a fearful angle and plunged down for hundreds of feet, the Indians unloaded the animals, and carried the packs on their heads. Had this not been done, the mules would have been apt to have gone over the precipice, owing to the loads striking against the inner wall of rock. Having safely accomplished this difficult part, we got

into the dry bed of a stream. The natives told us that at certain seasons this was utterly impassable, owing to the floods of water that came down when the upper snowfields were melting. On either side a wall of porphyry rock rose to an enormous height, and almost vertically and utterly bare of vegetation, with the exception of patches of ferns here and there, and some stunted bushes that were covered with a sort of purplish flower, though I don't know what it was.*

The difficulties we had already encountered on this day's march were as nothing to the difficulties of the dried-up bed of this mountain torrent, for it was strewn with boulders from the size of a potato to as big as a house. To make our way through this chaotic and stony wilderness was a painful and trying labour, and, moreover, it was beset with peril, for stones were constantly falling from above, and against this sort of bombardment we could not guard ourselves save by keeping our weather-eyes open, and, to add to our misery, an icy blast blew down the gully that chilled us to our very marrow. As we mounted still higher the cold increased, and patches of snow

* The "purplish flower" Mr. Feldje speaks of was no doubt the rhododendron, which flourishes amazingly up to a certain height on all the Ecuadorian mountains.—THE AUTHOR.

lay about, and where water had trickled over the rock icicles were hanging.

We laboured hard to reach the summit of the pass and descend to a warmer level before night set in, but we soon saw that our exertions would be fruitless, for already it was getting dark, and it was better to remain where we were than be benighted at a still greater altitude. Everything was savage and bare around us. All vegetation had entirely ceased, save patches of very coarse grass and some moss. Where we came to a decision to halt for the night the gorge turned at an acute angle, and here on one side the rocks had been so worn by the action of the water when it tore down the pass and struck this angle with tremendous force, that a large cavern had been formed, and strewn about, as if for our especial benefit, was a quantity of driftwood, consisting for the most part of bushes that had been torn up by the roots and had got jammed here. In proceeding to take possession of the cavern, we were assailed with an angry roar, that caused us to beat a hasty retreat.

"Boys," exclaimed Yasotoaró, with a cry of joy, "that is a bear, and to-night we will sup off his steaks!"

Yasotoaró looked to the priming of his musket, and

approached the cavern cautiously, but as he did so there issued a savage roar that was simply terrific, while the echo it caused in the narrow gully was the most marvellous thing I had ever heard in my life. Both the natives and the mules beat a retreat, going helter-skelter over the rocks at the imminent risk of breaking their necks, and the mules as they went scattered their packages far and wide. With a gun in each hand Yasotoaró advanced to the cave. Then he placed one gun between his legs, and fired the other into the cavern. Instantly there sprang forth a huge she bear, growling horribly, and with her jaws wide open, so that all her great teeth were fully exposed. With wonderful agility, considering his age, Yasotoaró jumped on one side, and poured the contents of his second gun into the enraged animal, but only wounding it slightly.

With a savage yell, the bear rose up, and threw herself on her assailant, who went down beneath her. Before any of us had time to take a step to help him, Nausiscaa sprang to his rescue with her drawn machete, which she most dexterously plunged into the bear's chest almost up to the hilt, so that she was unable to withdraw it. Maddened by the wound, from which the blood gushed like a fountain, the animal turned upon the girl with another yell, but Nausiscaa,

who had her gun in her left hand, sprang lightly back, took quick aim, and fired, and to our intense relief we saw the huge beast roll over on its side. Then, before she could recover, Yasotoaró was on his feet, and despatched her with a mighty thrust of his knife.

It had been an exciting tussle, and nothing could have been grander than Nausiscaa's coolness, skill, and courage. I certainly do think that had it not been for her it would have fared badly with the old hunter, for although we were prepared to render him every assistance, we were not as quick to act as this noble young woman. Barney was so carried away by his feelings of admiration for her, that, regardless of our presence, he hugged her to his breast.

"Me jewel of jewels," said he, "ye are the wonderfullest bit of a colleen the world has ever seen."

In falling Yasotoaró had slightly hurt his back, but with that exception he was unscathed.

"That was a narrow squeak," he said coolly, as with the hunter's caution he proceeded to reload his gun. At this moment we heard sounds coming from the cavern, which caused the old man to exclaim, "Hullo! there must be a family of bruins; we must pay our respects to them." Then he hastily collected some of the wood into a heap, and as it was bleached

white and as dry as tinder, he had no difficulty in setting it in a blaze, and its light illumined the cavern, into which he went, returning in a few moments with three little cubs a few days old. "This is a stroke of fortune for us boys," he said, "for these sucking bears will provide us with the daintiest meal a man need sit down to." Then he placed the three little animals on the ground, and killed them one after another by striking them on the head with a large stone. That done, he cried out to the Indians to come back, as all danger was passed, and he ordered them to collect the scattered packages; and, as he drew his large hunting knife and rolled his sleeves up preparatory to skinning the baby bruins, he said to us, "We must keep a sharp look-out, boys, for the fight's not over yet. Mr. Bear is out foraging for his family, and when he returns and finds we have taken possession of his premises and are supping off his youngsters, he'll go for us."

With this warning we were not likely to be taken off our guard, and we all turned to and helped the old man to skin the baby bears.

The Indians, having recovered their courage, returned, bringing the mules with them, and tethering them to the rocks. The fire was replenished, and very soon we were sitting round it, toasting bear-

steaks on the ends of our ramrods, I know that I for one made the heartiest supper that night of any I had enjoyed since leaving the vessel; in fact, I may say the heartiest since leaving port, for the tucker on board the ship was only fit to feed swine on.

The night was bitterly cold, and we were thankful for the shelter the cavern afforded us, but hardly had the watch below turned in than we were aware that Papa Bruin was approaching, as Yasotoaró predicted he would, as we heard snortings and sniftings and the stones rolling about. He must have been very much flabbergasted at the sight that met his gaze, for he let out a thundering roar, which was no doubt meant as a malediction, if we had only understood bear language. But evidently he came to the conclusion that discretion was the better part of valour, and if he realized that his wife and little ones were slaughtered, he thought probably that dead bear was not worth fighting about, and there was no law in the bear community preventing his taking another wife, or, in fact, as many as he liked. Consequently he beat a retreat, and though we sent two or three random shots after him, we failed to hit him in the darkness, and we heard him no more. This little excitement over, we replenished the fire, set the watch for the early hours of the night, and turned in.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MOMENT OF DEADLY PERIL.

The cold was intense all night, and we were not sorry when daylight came. We were astir betimes, and our first care was to cut off long, thin strips of bear-flesh, which we hung on a long stick to take with us, as the meat would dry rapidly in that atmosphere, and keep good for three or four days. Then we breakfasted off bruin-steaks, washed down with *yerba maté*, and after this sumptuous meal we felt fit for anything, and the cold which had been so trying during the night was now most exhilarating and enjoyable. The sun shone down from a clear sky, and the air was like crystal.

Having gathered up all our belongings, we packed the mules and resumed the journey. Our route was still upward and through a stony wilderness; and the mules, heavily laden as they were, had to toil and strain tremendously, and it was necessary for them

to stop frequently to recover their breath. The work, in fact, for all of us, beasts as well as men, was exceedingly trying and exhausting, but go we must, and so we breasted the steep cheerily and toiled upward to the summit of the pass, which we reached about noon, and then what a view burst upon our gaze. I know that I stood perfectly entranced, and I believe my mates were no less impressed. It was one of the grandest views I had ever seen; in fact, I will make so bold as to say that it could hardly be surpassed in any part of the world.

Westward, that is, towards the coast, was a long line of stupendous snow peaks that were absolutely free from clouds and mists, a circumstance, Yasotoaró informed us, that was exceedingly rare, for during most of the year these giants in the mountain world were hidden in dense wreaths of vapour. The old man knew them all, and stretched out his hands towards them as though they had been his children from which he was parting for ever, and I saw that his eyes were suffused with tears. But I was not surprised, for I have heard that men who live in the shadow of great mountains come to love the giants with a love that is little less than that one bestows upon his kind. I myself felt fascinated with them, for they were so awe-inspiring, so solemn, so mys-

terious, as they raised their great heads, covered with eternal ice and snow, from 20,000 to 25,000, feet into the air. The mountains that we took in with one sweep of the eye included the imposing mass of Chimborazo, and his wife Carahuirazo. Then there were Iliniza, Cotacachi, Corazon, Pichincha, Rumiñagui. The last-named is the lowest of the lot, and yet it is several hundred feet higher than Mont Blanc. Still nearer to us were Cotopaxi, with its huge column of smoke rising to a mighty height above the volcanic cone, then bending at an acute angle, and stretching for miles and miles out to sea; Cayambi, only three or four hundred feet lower than its smoking neighbour; Autisana; Altar, with its unique form; Sangay, Tunguragua, Sincholagua, and Imbabura. Of course there were many other peaks and pinnacles, but the most conspicuous were those I have named. Yasotoaró knew every name, and described them to us with enthusiasm; and he said that no more wonderful mountain region existed in the world. Few of these mountains had ever felt the tread of human foot; and their unexplored solitudes of snow and ice glittered in the morning sun as though they had been fields of polished jewels. These great Ecuadorian mountains are also the cradles of some of the mightiest rivers of the world, most of which flow into the Amazon.

Having drank our fill of this noble range of peaks, we turned eastward, where a view of a totally different character met the gaze. As far as the eye could reach, to where the hazy distance made only a blurred line, was an expanse of forests embracing thousands of square miles, and holding in their dark depths almost every species of the animal kingdom, as well as many strange and all but unknown tribes of savages, who contended for existence with the fierce things of the animal kingdom. And we knew that our path lay through those mysterious forests, which embraced dangers of no ordinary kind, all of which would have to be encountered and overcome if we were to succeed in our mission. But we white men and, I need scarcely add, Nausiscaa were not daunted. On the contrary, we were eager to push on and learn some of the secrets of those gloomy forests. But not so the Indians. With quivering lips and tearful eyes they told the most blood-curdling stories of the dangers that lay before us; dangers of snakes, of jaguars, of crocodiles and alligators, of swamps and rivers, and, above all, of fierce tribes of barbarous savages, who were armed with the deadly *bodoquera*,*

* Bodoqueras are blow-guns, in the use of which the natives are marvellously expert. The gun is made from a piece of the *Chouta* palm, which is the hardest that grows. A groove is cut in t: is from seven to nine feet long. The groove is next scraped and rubbed down

which rendered their conquest impossible. Of course we laughed, and told the trembling wretches that our guns, which could belch forth thunder and lightning, and send bolts of lead many hundreds of yards, were far more effective than the bodoqueras of the savages. This argument, however, did not allay their fears, and I have little doubt that they would have deserted us in a body had they not known that if they went back they would certainly be shot for the part they had taken in the revolt. It was, therefore, Hobson's choice with them.

Having taken our fill of the truly marvellous panorama, we commenced the descent towards the unknown forests. It was necessary to pick our way

with sand until it is as polished and smooth as a piece of plate glass. A similar half-tube is next made and fitted on to the first, and the halves are then bound together with long strings of fibre. The bore of this pipe is usually about three-eighths of an inch in diameter. From these blow-guns poisonous darts are puffed. The darts are very ingeniously made, the tips being fashioned out of very hard-grained wood, which is whittled down to a sharp point. The tips are then steeped in a most deadly poison, which is fatal to any living thing into which it enters. The darts are very small and light, and the natives can puff them to a distance ranging from three to four hundred yards. Their aim is usually unerring, and if the point but scratch the flesh of an animal death is almost certain. As a matter of fact, however, the dart generally enters very deeply, and the smallest birds or the largest game are brought down with it. Armed with these bodoqueras, and concealed behind the trees of the forests, the natives could render themselves very troublesome enemies to human foes, who would be struck by these silent messengers of death without knowing from whence they came.

most cautiously, for the rocks were slippery and excessively steep. Yasotoaró led, and seemed to choose the right way with unfailing instinct. How the mules got down I don't know, but there were parts where they literally had to slide on their hind-quarters.

At last we reached the zone of vegetation again and tropical heat, and all day, with the exception of a short halt, we kept going, the forests being unusually dark and intricate. That night we pitched our camp on a spot that we were compelled to clear with our axes and machetes. The only enemies at this period we had to fear were such as belonged to the animal kingdom, for there was no risk of the soldiers of Azogues overtaking us now; they would never venture so far, and we had not yet reached the territory of the hostile Indians. We all passed a very restless night, however, by reason of the mosquitoes, which seemed to swarm in millions, and were of a most bloodthirsty kind. But they were tame and innocent as compared with the *pium* fly, which commits its ravages in the day, but fortunately retires to rest at night. He is one of the most bloodthirsty little insects to be found in South American forests. They attack any exposed part of the flesh, and cause the blood to flow the moment they alight. At times they cause festering wounds, which may end in death. But there are two

insects in these forests much worse than the pium, and against which Nausiscaa and Yasotoaró specially warned us. These are a blind wasp and a little red bug known in some parts as the *bichos-Colorados*. It is said that if the first flies against you and touches the flesh it produces almost instant death. The second is a tiny little thing, almost invisible to the naked eye. If it gets on the human body it buries itself under the skin, and sets up the most frightful irritation, the result being that the unfortunate victim scratches himself to pieces, causing open wounds that not infrequently mortify. Happily, both these infernal insects are only common at certain seasons of the year. The pium, however, you have with you always.

Soon after resuming our journey we came to a broad river, flowing with a very rapid current, and about a quarter of a mile from where we struck the river there was a tremendous cataract, that filled the forest with its thunder. The heavy rains had flooded the river, and it was running unusually high. The question was, how were we to cross? As the water ran almost due south, we might have gone many scores of miles out of our course if we had followed it down. We, therefore, held a "pow-wow," as the Indians say, and talked the matter over, the result being that Chips, who was rapidly recovering from

the effect of his wound, advocated the construction of a light raft. This was really the only thing to do, and all hands set to work, under the superintendence of the carpenter, and felled some young trees, which were soon stripped of their branches. Then we lashed them together with lianas, a long fibrous creeper, as tough and as strong as coir rope, and far more pliable.

In the course of a couple of hours we had completed a very tolerable raft, and as the water of the river was almost level with the part of the bank where we were, we had no difficulty in launching the raft by means of two logs placed as rollers underneath. We then sent two Indians across in charge of an unloaded mule, and we attached a rope of lianas to the raft, so that we could haul it back. The passage was made without mishap, and one by one the mules were sent over; then the baggage in sections.

All this took up considerable time, as the current was very powerful, and the passage across was slow and tedious. At length Barney and his lady-love, Nausiscaa, with two Indians, got on the raft to cross, while I, Yasotoaró, Jim Smith, and four other Indians remained behind. All went well until the middle of the river was reached, when one of the Indians by some mischance let his paddle fall into the water, and the other Indian, getting alarmed, ceased paddling,

and the raft went down the stream at a rapid rate. At first we did not feel any alarm, as we made sure of being able to check it by means of the lianas rope, the shore end of which we made fast to a tree; but when the raft got to the end of its tether, the rope tautened and stretched, and then, to our horror, snapped, and with white faces and blanched lips we beheld the raft with its four passengers being carried with headlong speed towards the cataract, while we were utterly powerless to render any assistance.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DENIZENS OF THE VIRGIN FORESTS.

As the raft sped on to what seemed inevitable destruction, we were spellbound with horror. At the cataract the river was at least eighty yards wide and the water fell in one unbroken volume quite sixty feet, and seethed, hissed and roared with terrific fury amongst masses of broken jagged rocks. It was not possible for anything to live in such a seething whirlpool, even assuming that it escaped destruction as it was swept over the fall. The doom of our four companions, therefore, seemed absolutely certain, and we could do nothing to avert it. Fortunately, however, the brief —I may say momentary—feeling of helplessness in the presence of the terrible danger that rendered us inactive gave place to an energetic resolve to do something, for we could not stand idly by and watch our friends go to their fate and stir no hand to help them. Yasotoaró at least rose equal to the occasion, and he told us to tear down a quantity of lianas from

the trees and make a rope. It did not take us sailors long to do this, and in an incredibly brief space of time we had constructed a rope about fifty fathoms long by bending one length on to another. While we were busy with this Yasotoaró had secured a block of wood, weighing about a dozen pounds. This was made fast to one end of the rope, which was coiled up like a lasso. Then we ran along the bank until we were a little ahead of the raft, and while I held the rope Yasotoaró flung the block out to the raft. The first throw fell a little short, but, hastily coiling the rope in again, the block was thrown a second time with better success, for Barney caught it, and with great smartness he took three or four turns with the rope round a projecting spar of the raft, and thus brought her up with a jerk. In doing so one of the Indians lost his balance, and fell overboard. We caught sight of his head once as he was swept by the undertow to the falls. It was utterly impossible to do anything to save him, and we never saw him again.

We had now got the raft fast, but the strain on the rope was so great that it was a question whether it would hold or not. Another was therefore quickly prepared, and flung out, and with the double line we felt that danger had passed, and we breathed more

freely. We lost no time in towing the raft to a place of safety, and very shortly we had all accomplished the passage of the river and were on the opposite bank. We had passed an exciting half-hour that had taught us a lesson we resolved to profit by. Barney and Nausiscaa had never once lost their presence of mind during the terrible ordeal, and when at one time their doom seemed to be sealed I saw the girl grasp her lover's hand and hold it, while on her face was an expression of stern and resolute defiance—that is, defiance of the death that threatened them. However, all is well that ends well, and though we were greatly distressed at the loss of our friendly Indian, we felt thankful that the graver calamity had been averted.

It is not necessary to follow in detail each day's journey. One day, in fact, was very much like another, and the forests seemed interminable. The luxuriance and magnificence of the vegetation beggars all description. We passed through scenes that were perfect realms of enchantment, and dazzling and bewildering in their wealth of colour; and all these vast and trackless virgin forests were uninhabited save by the creatures of the animal kingdom, but how numerous and astounding they were! Monkeys swarmed in tens of thousands. They were there from

tiny things that one could have held in the palm of one's hand to huge fellows five and six feet high. One species, which our Indians called the "bearded monkey," was marvellously like a man both in appearance and movements. Then there were monster spiders, whose bite was death. These hideous and repulsive things construct webs of such strength that they are very difficult to break down. The web ensnares small birds, upon which the spider preys. Of the things that crawled on the ground, the most to be dreaded was a huge centipede, averaging about twelve inches in length, and a very ugly scorpion that, when disturbed, would rush angrily at the intruder. Of snakes there were an enormous variety, from a wonderful-looking creature brilliant scarlet in colour, about four feet in length, and very deadly, to monster boas, some of which were thirty feet long. We often saw these reptiles hanging down from the trees, and looking for all the world like leafless branches until they began to move. These great reptiles never showed any disposition to attack us, and, in fact, the snakes were far easier to avoid than the spiders, centipedes, and scorpions. The jaguars sometimes approached very near our camp at night, as if bent on mischief, but a shot from one of our guns generally caused them to think better of it, and they would

turn tail sullenly and go off with a disappointed growl. But there was one little animal, the most demoniacal and savage little spitfire to be found anywhere, I should think. It was a beautifully marked species of wild cat, not much larger than the domestic cat. It had a wonderfully glossy skin, huge claws, and eyes that were like blazing points of fire. This savage little beast, whenever disturbed, made for us with indescribable fury. Snarling, spitting, hissing, it would leap from tree to tree with extraordinary agility, and spring right into our midst; and as it gave us no chance of shooting it, we had to club it. Fortunately, by its spitting and hissing, it gave us ample warning of its approach.

To attempt even in a feeble way to convey any notion of the birds would be a perfectly hopeless task. Their colours were dazzling in their brilliancy, and some of these denizens of the forests were so entrancingly magnificent that one gazed upon them in rapturous silence; words seemed common and vulgar in the presence of such glories. The swamps and rivers were of course infested with alligators and crocodiles, that resented the slightest intrusion on their privacy. There were huge toads, too, that barked exactly like deep-throated dogs, and in the rivers were three fish of a very deadly kind that we

had to be exceedingly careful to avoid when we were fording. The names of these fish are skait, piranha, and caneiro. The two first are furnished with rows of most powerful teeth, set together exactly like a saw, and they inflict perfectly horrible wounds. The caneiro, however, is almost worse than these, for he has a sucker-like mouth, and he rushes at his victim, fixes his sucker, gives a mighty wrench with his body, and literally tears out a great lump of the victim's flesh. Indians have been known to have the flesh of a leg entirely torn off and the bone left bare by these voracious wretches. In fording a river, it is necessary to beat and prod the water with long sticks to frighten the ravenous brutes away.

At night the forests were alive with a thousand unknown varieties of insects and animals, and I may almost say ablaze with myriads of fire-flies.

Thus for many days did we pursue our journey through this mystic land, where it seemed as if the foot of man had never before trod. Our course was always eastward, and we steered by the compass; and though we all kept tolerably well, although most of us white men had a touch of fever, we unfortunately lost all our mules. Two of them were bitten by snakes, a third was carried off one night by a tiger, and the other three were attacked by some strange

disease. It began with shivering, then soon afterwards the animal tumbled down and appeared to be seized with convulsions, and it died in about six hours. The loss of our animals necessitated our carrying the baggage ourselves, and it was done up in small packages and distributed amongst the party. This naturally made our progress somewhat slower. At length one day we struck a well-worn path, and from this it became evident that we were nearing an Indian settlement, and it behoved us to be cautious, as we did not know whether we were going to encounter friends or foes. Nausiscaa was of opinion that we were approaching one of the big rivers, on the banks of which many different tribes were settled. Yasotoaró and I went ahead of our little party as scouts, and Nausiscaa, her lover, Jim Smith, and the carpenter led the van.

Nausiscaa proved to be right, and, after about two hours' marching along a well-beaten path, we came to a river with a rapid current. Over this river was a *taravita*,* but there were no signs of any huts on

* A taravita is a rope bridge; as the Indians call it, a *puente de maroma—i.e.* bridge of the acrobats. This very primitive bridge is formed by two parallel ropes stretched from trees on the banks. Attached to the ropes is a travelling sling; each end of the sling has a loop fitted with a ring of hard wood, and the rope is rove through this ring. Any one wanting to cross sits in the sling, and, using the ropes as rails, works himself over. It is a somewhat laborious feat,

the other side. As Nausiscaa and Yasotoaró said, however, the Indians generally built their huts concealed amongst the trees, and it was therefore necessary for us to proceed with caution. Before attempting to cross, we fired a gun, and then waited to see what effect it produced. Beyond causing a stir amongst the lazy crocodiles sunning themselves on the banks, a deafening chatter amongst the monkeys, and a flutter amongst the birds, nothing followed. If human beings were in the neighbourhood, not one showed himself, as we thought might be the case when the gun was fired. At last Nausiscaa, who had been thoughtful for some time, said she did not think this was a main river, but merely a loop, or tributary, of a larger stream. This opinion was also shared by Yasotoaró, so we prepared to cross, and of course had to do so one at a time. It was ticklish work, for the ropes were old, and badly and unevenly stretched. It took us two hours to get all the party over, and then we resumed our march, still following a track. We travelled for nearly two hours and a half, until suddenly we debouched on a clearing, and what a sight met our gaze !

and not unattended with danger, for as often as not the ropes are old and rotten ; with the fatuity peculiar to the natives, they do not renew them until somebody has been drowned by their breaking. These taravitas are peculiar to all the Indian territories in South America where there are no regular bridges.

CHAPTER XX.

WE PREPARE FOR WAR.

Before us flowed a noble river, at the sight of which Nausiscaa nearly went into ecstasies, for she thought it was her native river, the Napo; but we soon learn that it was not so, but the Bobonaza, which is the largest of the tributaries of the Upper Pastassa. The stream, therefore, over which we had crossed by the taravita was a loop of this river. Before us was a little village of huts, and a few tame pigs were rooting about, while in a fenced-off part of the clearing were some sheep and cattle. These things were signs of civilization—the first we had seen since leaving Azogues. As we advanced a few steps, to our surprise a white man appeared, and came towards us. From his dress we saw that he was a Jesuit priest. He was as surprised to see us as we were to see him, and, as he raised his large straw hat, he asked—

"Come you here as friends or foes?"

Yasotoaró went forward, and, removing his hat also, he held forth his hand, saying—

"We are peaceful travellers."

"Are you traders?"

"No."

"Whence come you, then, and whither go you, for travellers are not often met with in this part of the country?"

"We are going to the east in search of gold."

"Truly you have set yourselves a task, and are indulging in Utopian dreams. Gold there is, an reports be true, but it is little short of madness to try and get it."

"Why?" asked Yasotoaró, in surprise.

"Because the dangers that beset your path are terrible."

Yasotoaró smiled as he said, "We have already encountered dangers, and those that lie before can be no greater than those which are behind."

"If you are from the coast, yes, infinitely greater, for the *Jivaros bravos* will dispute the way with you."*

The old priest here made a sign with his hand, and

* Jívaros bravos is the name applied to the savage tribes who constantly make war on the more peaceful tribes. They are fierce, treacherous, and cruel.

in a few moments about a couple of hundred natives —men, women, and children—appeared on the scene.

"Behold my flock," he said. "We saw you coming, and, as we are expecting to be attacked by the Jívaros, a tribe of whom is in the neighbourhood, we waited with arms in our hands until we were assured of your friendly purpose. We give you welcome now, and such entertainment as we can afford is at your disposal."

We thanked him heartily, and told him that we wanted for little, but should be glad to rest for a few days. Subsequently, as he seemed curious to know more about us, I frankly told him our story, and he said that a rumour had for some time been current amongst the Indians that a party of white men had penetrated far to the east, and had found gold, but that they had all perished. He tried to persuade us not to continue our enterprise, but we told him that not even the fear of death could deter us.

We were thankful for the rest and comparative comfort this little station afforded us after our hardships in the forests. The Indians forming the colony were all Christians, under the care of the old priest. He was one of a noble band, who, giving up all the comforts and luxuries of civilization, withdrew from the world, and, penetrating to the dark interior of

Central and South America, civilized and Christianized such Indians as they could get to follow them. The lives of these missionaries were a constant struggle against the forces of Nature, and they had to hold what they had won by force of arms, for the fierce tribes made war upon them, and, whenever successful, killed all the men, carried off the women, children, and cattle, and destroyed the Christian villages. Success, however, was not always to be counted on by the savages, and very frequently an ignominious defeat followed the attempt; for the priests taught their flocks how to defend themselves against their barbarous neighbours. The Christians were never the aggressors, but they were stubborn defenders when attacked, and, having firearms, they could give a good account of themselves.

Our entertainers dispensed their hospitality liberally, and we were plentifully supplied with fish, vegetables, and other good things, a sheep being killed for our especial benefit. And, of course, there were unlimited supplies of *chica*.*

* This is a drink as well as a food, and is common to the Indian tribes all through South America. Its mode of preparation is somewhat peculiar. It is concocted from what is known as Yuca, that is, the Cassava root. It is first of all boiled, and then chewed by the women and spat out into a large earthenware pot, where it is allowed to ferment. In the course of a few days it acquires a peculiar sharp taste, and it has the appearance of mashed potatoes, with a strange

That evening Barney asked me to stroll a little way with him, as he wished to speak to me, and so we walked along the river bank, and sat on an upturned canoe. Then he opened fire—

"Feldje," he began, "you are a good friend of mine, and Oi've great respict for your opinions, and so Oi'm going to ax yez to give me some advice. Yez see, Oi'm in love wid that little woman just about as bad as a man ever was in love wid a woman. Of course Oi'd loike to get spliced to her, and me first thought was to ax the good priest there to do the job for us. But, yez see, it's this way, Feldje—we are in a moighty curious counthry, and maybe I'd be laving her a widdy before I got out of it. Or maybe she'd be laving me the same, and then, begorra, Oi'd just kill meself with sorrowing after her. So, anyway, we'd both be widdys, and that would be moighty onconvanient."

"You are right, Barney; it would," I answered, with a laugh.

"Well, now," he went on, scratching his head with

smell that one wants to get accustomed to. To make it into a drink, a quantity is put into a vessel filled with water, and it is stirred and kneaded about with the hand. After standing for about half another day all the fibrous pieces float to the top and are removed, and the drink is then ready. It has the appearance somewhat of muddy cider, but it is said to be not only very palatable, but refreshing and sustaining. If taken in large quantities it intoxicates.

a puzzled air, "what do yez think Oi ought to do, for, be me sowl, Oi'm just breaking me heart for love of the swate bit colleen?"

"No fear for you, Barney," said I. "Your heart will keep whole, and this is my advice. As you say, we are in a queer country, and we are making a queer journey; and when we remember that all Peter Duncumbe's party perished, who can say but what a like fate may overtake us? I think, therefore, that it is better that for the time being you should remain a lover, and not become a husband; for it certainly would be awkward if the poor little woman should be left a widow while yet a bride. Now, what you've got to do is to guard her, as I know you will, and when we reach more civilized regions—if ever we do—you can make her your wife."

He was much touched by what I said, and I saw tears gathering in his blue eyes as he grasped my hand warmly.

At that moment we observed Nausiscaa coming towards us. She had missed him, and came out to seek him. So I rose and left them together, knowing that under such circumstances two were company, while a third person was a nuisance. Nausiscaa had evidently been performing her toilet, and, if it were possible, she looked more beautiful than ever. I

could not help gazing upon her, and I thought to myself, "If Barney married you, and you became a widow, hang me, if I would not ask you to take me for your second husband."

A little later the good father spoke to me about them. He thought they seemed very sweet on each other, and asked me if it was not so. I told him it was.

"Then, why do they not let me marry them?" he exclaimed.

Thereupon I informed him of the conversation that had taken place between me and Barney.

"Your advice is good as far as it goes," he anwered. "But I have better advice still. This journey of yours is a mad, Quixotic sort of expedition, and will probably end in you all losing your lives. Now, why should the life of that young woman be risked? Leave her behind, and leave your friend also. I will make them man and wife, and they will be exceedingly useful here. Of course they could go where they liked, but they might do worse than remain with me."

I promised the good priest to make known his suggestions to Barney, as I felt it my duty to do, and I took an opportunity to carry out my promise before we turned in for the night.

I shall never forget Barney's face as I spoke of his remaining behind. It was a study for a painter.

"Remain behind!" he exclaimed with something like indignation. Then he placed his hand on his heart, and added solemnly, "Feldje, I left the ship wid yez, and Oi'm going to stick to yez, live or die. Oi'm bound to see the end of this business, one way or other; and if there's foighting to be done, Oi shan't be far off, never fear. Barney Fagan's not the boy to desert his mates because there is danger about. But this is what Oi'll do—Oi'll tell the little woman she must stop here till Oi come back for her."

I had always known this simple-hearted Irishman to be as staunch as steel; but somehow he seemed to be still more ennobled in my eyes now. He had in him the stuff that heroes are made of; and in the fight at the gaol he showed that he could be a desperate and terrible foe. That he would be of immense service to our little party, therefore, there was no doubt. And in refusing to accept the safety, shelter, and comparative comfort of the mission station, he proved his splendid nature.

The next morning he spoke to Nausiscaa on the subject. But when he suggested that she should remain behind she was as indignant as he himself had been.

"Remain here while you go!" she cried. "Never! Love brooks no parting, and, though you be going to certain death, I go with you."

Of course there was no gainsaying two such devoted lovers as these, and all we could do was to let them please themselves.

So a few very pleasant days passed, and we felt loath to move from our comfortable quarters; but, as we could not stay there indefinitely, we began to speak of departure. Just as we were ready, however, to once more take to the forests, some of the mission scouts came in with the ominous news that a very large body of savage Indians were moving rapidly on the station. Then the good father came to us and said—

"You are Christian men, and in the name of the great Master I call upon you to lend us your assistance in defending our lives and our small possessions which we have won with honest toil and might from this primitive wilderness. The safety of our women and children is threatened by the advancing savages, who are fiercer than the jaguars of the forests, and more cruel than any dumb thing that crawls or walks in the gloomy depths of these vast solitudes. Therefore we solicit your aid to help us to beat off these poor men whose aim is to destroy us and stay the spread of God's light in the wilderness."

This touching appeal, uttered with simple earnestness and most moving eloquence, stirred our blood. Not that we wanted any such incentive, but the dear old man's words aroused us to enthusiasm, and we answered him with a ringing British cheer that must almost have made the oncoming savages pause if it had reached them. England, Ireland, and Scotland were represented by us white men; and although we might have been described as "merely ignorant sailors," we had a warm love for the Old Country, and were prepared to defend with our lives the honour and glory of the grand old flag that for a thousand years had braved the battle and the breeze. Some people may sneer at this as merely a sentiment; but, by Heaven, it is a sentiment that has placed the British nation in the van of civilization, and made her a conqueror in all parts of the world. And to men situated as we were then it was a sentiment that put the might of giants in our arms and the determination to conquer or die in our hearts. God grant that the day may never dawn when the sentiment shall lose its charm for British people.

Speaking for myself and mates, I said, "Father, we shall throw in our lot with you, and shall defend you and yours to the last drop of our blood."

The brave old priest was so touched by my words

that he wept as he grasped my hands in both of his and pressed it warmly. Then Yasotoaró spoke.

"Father," he said, "my brave Indian followers, who have sacrified everything to follow me, will pour out their blood for you, an it be necessary. Do I speak your thoughts?" he asked, appealing to his men, who had gathered round him.

The answer was a cheer and shout that left no possible doubt as to its meaning. Then Nausiscaa stepped forward, looking magnificent in her pride and beauty.

"Father," she said, "I am a woman, and stand alone; therefore I represent myself. But I shall fight too in your cause; and if I fall look for me where the dead lie thickest."

The effect of this little speech was electrical, coming as it did from a brave and beautiful girl. In an instant Barney had sprung forward, and with one arm round her waist and the other raised aloft, he exclaimed with burning enthusiasm—

"Be jabers, she doesn't stand alone, and she represents more than herself, for she represents me; and if we fall yez may take your oath that we shall be surrounded with scores of our enemies, who will have bitten the dust before we succumb."

At this up went a mighty cheer that rent the very air, and startled the birds and the beasts of the

forest; and the lazy crocodiles sunning themselves on the river bank raised their ponderous heads, wondering no doubt why the dreamy solitudes were disturbed by such unwonted noise. The good priest was deeply affected, and, stepping up to Barney and Nausiscaa, bade them kneel, and then he placed his hands upon their heads, blessing them; and he breathed a prayer that God would watch over and protect them. The whole scene was deeply affecting, and I know that my eyes got misty. I suppose it was due to the heat haze from the river, or some other cause.

We now set heartily to work to organize our system of defence, and our first care was to fell a large number of trees. The Indians are wonderfully expert at this, and they will bring the largest tree down in a space of time that, if mentioned, would scarcely be believed by any one who had not seen them work. Our next step was to form breastworks of the fallen trees, making a little ring of forts, as it were, round the village. Two of these forts were so placed as to command the river for some distance, while the side farthest from the river was made doubly secure by having a semicircular defence of stakes sharply pointed and driven firmly into the ground, point uppermost; and the whole barricade rendered secure and solid by being bound together by twisted lianas.

In the huts in the very centre of the village it was arranged that all the women, children, and very old men were to be placed at the first alarm, and in the event of the fighting party being driven from their outer defences they were, like a contracting ring, to gather slowly round the central huts, and there fight till the last man fell.

This scheme of defence had so far been perfected by time darkness set in, and our next care was to divide our little force into fighting columns. It was unanimously agreed that the good priest was to remain with the women and children. Then the two river forts were placed in charge of Barney and Nausiscaa respectively, each with a little following of Indians. The other forts were to be held by myself, Yasotoaró, Chips, and Jim Smith, the supreme command being by common consent vested in Yasotoaró, who, from his knowledge of military tactics, gained by years of service in the Ecuadorian army, no less than his intimate acquaintance with savage modes of warfare, was peculiarly fitted for the position. Jim Smith was a very reserved, quiet, and unassuming man, but I knew at least that he would give an excellent account of himself. Fortunately we had plenty of ammunition, and a fair supply of firearms, besides chonta spears, bodaqueras, clubs, and

machetes. If we had only had two or three small light cannon our armament would have been complete, but, nothwithstanding the absence of these, we still felt that we had considerable advantages on our side.

Lest the reader may be inclined to suppose that our defences were out of proportion to the foe we expected to encounter, I may remark that the Indians of the Ecuadorian Oriente are amongst the bravest and most determined savages in the world. The Jívaros, which is rather a generic term for various tribes, includes the Orejones or big ears, the Piojés, and the Macaguájes, and these tribes are the most bloodthirsty of any that are to be found on the American Continent. They are dangerous and barbarous, and will kill anything from the mere love of slaughter. Their powers of endurance are truly remarkable, and they seem to be absolutely without fear. There is an entire absence of servility amongst them, and they will resent to the death an insult to their pride.*

* These various tribes are in the habit of drinking what is called *ayahuásca*. It is a decoction of some sort of herb which, if taken in quantity, produces a furious frenzy, in which condition they are indifferent to everything. They prime themselves with this stuff previous to attacking an enemy, and it perhaps accounts for the fact that they will neither receive nor show quarter, while they exhibit a demoniacal delight at the sight of blood. Their favourite weapon in warfare is a long thin spear with poisoned point. They carry a bundle containing from seven to ten spears, which they throw with marvellous dexterity. They also carry a shield to protect themselves from the spears of their enemies.

Being thoroughly prepared, and having perfect confidence in ourselves to hold our own, even if we could not impress a deep and lasting lesson on the foe, we waited somewhat impatiently for the fun to begin. But when three or four days had passed, and there were no signs of his coming, we began to think that either he had changed his mind or that our information was inaccurate. Then we sent out scouts, and they returned with the intelligence that they could find no trace of the enemy. Notwithstanding this, the priest advised us not to relax our vigilance; for he assured us that the tribes we had to deal with were the most treacherous savages to be met with anywhere. And so artful were they in their mode of attack, that when you thought them miles away they might be within a spear's-length of you. This was also confirmed by Nausiscaa, who counselled the utmost caution, especially at night-time.

At length, one night, while I was on watch in my section of the defences, I fancied I heard a peculiar soft tapping in the forest, and on my mentioning this to Yasotoaró he said that we must arouse our little garrison, for the enemy had come at last, for what we heard was signalling by the *tundúli*.*

* The tundúli is a large drum covered with the inner membrane of the alligator's or crocodile's skin, and sometimes with goatskins. By

means of distinct raps on this drum, corresponding to a code, the natives convey signals for many miles, men with drums being stationed at various points. The taps are so faint, that it is only by chance the unaccustomed ear can detect them. The natives of South America have a wonderfully quick ear, while their sense of smell passes belief. By means of these two facilities they track animals with unerring precision, and by smelling the ground they can even tell what kind of animal has passed along.

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE WAS A PONDEROUS AND OVERWHELMING RUSH, AS OF A TORNADO.

We had previously arranged that in the event of the enemy declaring himself during the night, our little garrison was to assemble at their respective posts as rapid and noiselessly as possible; and the women and children and old men were to immediately repair to the central huts—the citadel, if I might so term it. So now, when we heard the ominous signs of the tapping drums, word was passed for the orders to be put in force. But before those orders could be thoroughly carried out, we were to have practical proof of the correctness of Nausiscaa's and the good priest's statement, that when the savages were supposed to be farthest away they were the nearest.

The night was terribly dark, unfortunately, for the new moon was not due for two or three days. And there was a pretty strong breeze, which caused such

a rustling and swishing amongst the trees, that other sounds were drowned, and it was only by the merest chance I caught the sounds of the drum. To this cause—and I will frankly own carelessness in not having stationed our posts so as to give us warning of the approach of the enemy—was due the calamity that overtook us. But I would urge as some excuse that beyond our inner line of defence we had planted stakes—a *chevaux de frise*, as it were, which we considered to be all but impassable by naked savages, and that perhaps made us more careless than we should have been. Owing to the non-appearance of the enemy, we had been lured into a false sense of security, and had stupidly neglected to place our sentries during the hours of darkness at this outer barricade, and terrible did we suffer for our neglect.

When the tapping of the tundúli fell upon my ears, and, as I have said, I caught the sounds by the merest chance, and during a slight lull in the wind, I spoke to Yasotoaró, who happened to be keeping watch with me, and he undertook to turn out the garrison and get the women and children into a place of safety. I did not leave my post, but stood with my gun in my hand, and without thought of immediate danger.

Yasotoaró had not been gone more than ten minutes

when, with a suddenness that was extraordinary, a mighty roar rent the air. It was not the roar of wind, nor the roar of water, but the combined voices of our savage and exultant foe, yelling in unison as only savages can yell. Simultaneously with the shout there was a ponderous and overwhelming rush, as of a tornado, and I realized at once that the long-expected enemy had burst into our enclosure, and were swooping upon us like ravenous vultures thirsting for our blood. I did not lose my presence of mind. The discipline of my naval training served me in good stead, and as I saw a cloud of dusky forms looming through the darkness, and executing movements that were suggestive of fiends executing some wild and terrible fandango, I took deliberate aim and fired into them; then, dropping my smoking piece, I snatched up another that was one of half a dozen standing in a row against the stockade, and I let bang again; and so on until I had exhausted the loaded guns, banging right and left into the gyrating Indians. To that act of mine our escape from wholesale massacre was probably attributable. These savages have a wholesome dread of firearms, notwithstanding their bravery, and as they saw flash after flash, and beheld their comrades fall, their rush was checked for a few precious minutes—precious, indeed,

to us, for my firing had quickened the movements of our people, who ran for dear life to the defences.

In three or four different places in our little fortress we had prepared bundles of dried grass and wood saturated with crocodile fat, and moistened with turpentine. These bundles were confined in a framework roughly made of iron hoops from some casks, and the framework was strung between two poles by wire. In the event of a night attack, this inflammable material was to be set in a blaze, so that we might have light, and thus be able to distinguish friend from foe; otherwise our own Indians might be mistaken for the savages. Men had been told off for this particular duty, and faithfully they carried it out. Suddenly the fires blazed up, and revealed a scene as weird and astounding as anything human eyes could behold.

Outside of our positions was a horde of naked men seemingly mixed up in one confused rabble; but it was in seeming only, for, as a matter of fact, they were well organized in battalions, and with no little military and tactical skill. They were engaged in their war-dance; and as they brandished their spears yelled and spun round. The effect was most extraordinary, seen by the light of the blazing fires, which flared and hissed in the wind, and scattered myriads

of sparks over the moving mass. Not only was the scene weird, but it was diabolical in its picturesque suggestiveness and in its chiarobscuro. The moving men, the waving trees, the flashing spears, the flying sparks that filled the air, the dusky forms, and trees thrown into prominent relief by the glare of the fires made up a spectacle that was never likely to be forgotten by those who saw it.

I took in all the details of the picture as I have described them by a single *coup d'œil*, as the French say; and I saw, too, that the discharge of my muskets had been peculiarly fatal to the enemy, for I noticed a number of fallen men lying scattered about the ground. The delay that I caused enabled our people to rush to the defences, so that when a few minutes later the horde of savages like a mighty blast of wind swept over us, we were in a measure prepared for the shock; though, to a very large extent, it was each man for himself, because the enemy had come too suddenly to close quarters, and had taken us off our guard. Their yells were absolutely terrific, and for the next quarter of an hour or so it was about as hot a bit of work as one would care to see. To hear or give orders was impossible, for the din was deafening. By a stroke of good luck, I found myself surrounded with a dozen or so of our own

people; all fine fellows, who knew that they were fighting for everything they held dear on earth, and that defeat meant torture and death to them.

In the little interval that occurred after I had fired off my guns I was enabled to reload three of them, and each of my men had a musket, and, by a tacit understanding, we presented arms at the enemy, and poured in a volley as the dusky brutes bore down upon us. This checked their rush again in our quarter, but they enveloped us in a cloud of spears, and two of my little party bit the dust mortally wounded. And now the savages came at us again with increased impetus, and we met them with our machetes. These savages had no knives, but were dependent on their spears, so that the advantage was on our side; but so fierce was their rush that we had to fall back, and we came in contact with Yasotoaró, who, surrounded with a gallant band, was fighting like a giant. Uniting our two little parties in a solid phalanx, we presented a bold front to the enemy, and took the offensive now. Our own Indians, usually so peacefully and quiet, had been roused to frenzy, and they fought like demons, plying their dreadful machetes with telling effect. So impetuous were they that Yasotoaró and I had as much as we could do to keep in front of them.

For some minutes the fight raged hotly. It was give and take with a vengeance. A wall of dead began to rise before us, and the ground was slippery with blood, for the machetes make terrible and ugly gashes. At first it seemed as if we were beating the enemy back—and, in fact, were really doing so—when he received reinforcements and made another swoop and rush, and we were pressed back towards the centre of the village, so that friends and foes became mixed up in the *mêlee*. It was a terrific struggle—a human maëlstrom—that roared and hissed with horrible fury.

And now, to add to the horror of the scene, some of the huts were fired, and the lurid glare lighted up the field of carnage, showing us the dying and the dead mingled in inextricable confusion. The screams of the women and children added to the din, and the shrieks and yells of the frantic savages were frightful to hear. For some little time I found myself cut off from my friends and surrounded with a crowd of the enemy, who made the most frantic efforts to spear me; but, being a powerful man, I wielded my machete with terrible effect, although I think that in the end I must have succumbed to superior force and numbers. Then, just as I felt that my strength was giving out, I heard a wild "Hoorah"

that there was no mistaking. It was the hearty voice of dear old Barney; and with all the strength of his lusty lungs he roared out—

"Now then, boys, blaze at 'em. Let the divils have it."

Lightning and thunder followed this speech. It was the lightning and thunder of a volley of musketry, and I saw the savages go down around me like ninepins.

"Be jabers," cried the cheery, jovial voice of Barney in my ear, "we were only just in time to get yez clear of the dirty spalpeens."

I had no opportunity to make answer. To my amazement I saw that he was shoulder to shoulder with Nausiscaa, and, his Irish blood being up, he appeared utterly reckless. He had come to my rescue with a little following, and with a rush they pressed the savages back. It gave me a few moments of breathing time, and I was also enabled to rally my own men, and once more we threw ourselves on the foe.

It seemed now to be nothing more than a wild scrimmage; but the enemy's ranks were broken, and it was plain that the wretched savages were disheartened and were falling back. Fortunately for us, too, the darkness of night was rolling away before the golden and crimson glory of the dawning day. The

river swept redly on its course; and the impenetrable gloom of the surrounding forest was giving place to light. Following up our advantage, and being reinforced by more of the garrison, for the savages had concentrated themselves on our quarter, we poured in another deadly volley, and then a squad of our men fell back to reload. Before our firearms the enemy had no chance, and they were thrown into disorder; and yet for a little time longer they fought with the bravery of desperation. But the battle was won, and volley after volley scattered the poor savages until a panic seized them, and they turned and fled. The sun was shining full now, and it revealed a terrible state of carnage and slaughter. The dead and dying were lying in heaps, in many cases friend and foe being locked in a grip of death.

I had miraculously escaped without so much as a scratch, and my first thought was of my mates, and particularly of Barney and Nausiscaa. Looking round, I beheld at a little distance, and near the ruin of the *chevaux de frise*, Nausiscaa on her knees, and, rushing forward, I saw she was bending over her lover, who was lying wounded on the ground. She was in a pitiable state of distress, and almost frantic with grief. It was no time for questions. Barney was insensible, and blood was streaming from a wound in

his head. So I raised him up, threw him over my shoulder, and hurried with him into the village. I found that the good father was already busy exercising his surgical and medical skill in a large shed that had been used for a store; and knowing that I could not leave Barney in better hands than his and Nausiscaa's, and the other women who were making bandages and bringing in water, I hurried off to learn the fate of my other mates. I found that Jim Smith and Chips, who, as I subsequently heard, had fought like lions, were safe. But, alas! how can I describe my grief when the news was brought to me that our good friend Yasotoaró was amongst the slain. I think I wept like a child, nor was I ashamed of my tears. From what we could ascertain, it seemed that when he became separated from me he was surrounded with the enemy, and though he fought like the hero he was, he was overpowered, cut down, and with remorseless savagery almost hacked to pieces. Thus perished our staunch and brave friend, and if not another life but his had been sacrificed we should have counted the battle a costly one. But almost half the men population of the little village were amongst the slain.

It soon became evident that the savages had made a fatal mistake in their plan of attack, for instead of

surrounding the village, as they might have done, except on the river side, they had concentrated their force on the section where I and Yasotoaró were on duty. Their first great rush enabled them to penetrate beyond our defensive works, and almost reach the shelter where the women were. But they were driven back, and, taking advantage of their wavering, Barney and Nausiscaa, who had performed prodigies of valour, rallied their followers, and, throwing, themselves on the disordered foes, turned their wavering into a rout, as I have already shown. But if we had suffered, the enemy had suffered infinitely more. We counted five hundred dead, and it was evident that a large number of wounded had been carried away. Had we been strong enough to follow the enemy up we might have destroyed him almost to a man; but we were not. Nor was it necessary, for the priest, who knew the habits of these wild tribes well, said that they had received such a lesson, and their loss had been so severe, that it would be a long time before they gave trouble again.

CHAPTER XXII.

WE CONTINUE OUR JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO.

I HAVE already said that I do not consider I can be classed in the category of sentimental men. As a sailor, whose life has been very rough and hard, I doubt if I have any of those fine feelings peculiar to 'long-shore people, who are surrounded with luxury and refinement, and become as sensitive as barometers; but this I can state, in the most solemn and conscientious manner, my heart felt twisted and rent as I gazed on the dead face of Yasotoaró. My throat was filled with a lump that almost choked me, and I was half blinded with mist in my eyes. It may be said that Yasotoaró had only joined us from purely selfish motives, and that by doing so hoped to accumulate a fortune if the stories of El Dorado proved true. But I should like to meet the man who would seriously make this assertion; I guess there would be a deadly quarrel that could end in but one way. I

avow my firm belief that the grand old man was the most unselfish being who had ever walked upright in the light of God's day. He was old, and no longer had the desires and ambition of youth to spur him on. He knew that under any circumstances the sands of his life had almost run out, and that it would not be long before he received a summons to cross the dark Styx. Had he remained in Azogues, where he had all the comforts almost he could desire, he could have ended his days in peace. But for our sakes he had sacrificed everything. To him we owed our escape from the fearful quicksilver mines, and, marching with us into the wilderness, he had shared our peril and hardship, and now was lying dead—a victim to the friendship he had so ungrudgingly given to friendless and hopeless men. No wonder, therefore, that his burial was the occasion of more than ordinary sadness.

His was the first body that we consigned to its last resting-place, and the heat of the weather rendered it imperative that the dead should be quickly put under ground. So we dug a deep grave for the old hunter at the foot of a truly magnificent palm on the skirts of the village, a very giant amongst the giants of the forest. Here we laid him to rest, wrapped in a mantle of woven grasses, and without any coffin.

We laid his gun and machete beside him, and the good father said some simple and touching prayers. Then, having put in a layer of earth, we placed some heavy stones on that, so as to prevent the wild animals from getting at the honoured remains, and we filled the grave up, building a cairn over it, and Chips made a magnificent monument out of a great slab of *palo mulato*, one of the hardiest and most durable woods that grow in the forest, and on it he carved, in deep letters, the following epitaph:—

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man should give up his life for his friend."

Here lies a man of men, one Yasotoaró. A mighty hunter, a staunch and utterly unselfish friend; brave, simple, and honest, like all true men. His life was sacrificed while he was fighting with the courage of a lion for those whom he had so nobly served. Those who loved him truly laid him here in the strong and fervent hope that his spirit has gone to God.

This was not an ornate record of imaginary virtues. It was the simple expression of men who felt what they uttered.

The sad and solemn duty of burying poor Yasotoaró ended, we set to work to dig two huge trenches for the disposal of the other dead. Our brave enemies we buried in one trench, and our friends in the other. We worked all that day and far into the night, making large fires to give us light. It was melancholy and heavy work, and we were thankful indeed when

it ended. Then we sought our well-earned rest, and I for one slept many hours in a sound and death-like sleep, from which I awoke refreshed and strengthened.

As can readily be imagined, the village was as a house of mourning. There was not a family that had not suffered a loss in the sanguinary struggle. The only consolation was that wholesale massacre and extinction of the mission had been averted; and the enemy had been so terribly punished that it was doubtful if they would ever again return to the charge —at any rate, not for a very long time. Not the least of the many painful incidents that had occurred was the misfortune that had befallen dear Barney Fagan. He had received a terrible lacerated scalp wound from a spear. Of so serious a nature was it that for many days the good priest, who, like all his class who go out into these wildernesses, had studied the science of medicine, and had received practical training in surgery, did not hold out much hope of his recovery. But man never had a more devoted or tenderer nurse than Barney had in Nausiscaa. It was truly touching to watch the utterly unselfish way she devoted herself to him, and she had to be compelled, almost by sheer force, to take the rest necessary for her own health. Her life was bound up in his. Truly he and she realized the poet's lines—

"His life is as a woven rope—
A simple strand may lightly part;
Love's single thread is all her hope,
Which breaking breaks her heart."

However, Barney's end had not yet come apparently. He had a magnificent constitution, and this, aided by the skill of the priest and the splendid nursing of Nausiscaa, enabled him to triumph for the time being over the common foe of all mankind; and in about three weeks after the fight the priest pronounced him out of danger, but said it would be a considerable time before he would be fit to endure the hardship of travel again. When Barney heard this, he was much distressed, and sending for me, he said with very manifest emotion—

"Feldje, me dear ould friend, Oi'm laid up in dock, and Oi'm tould it will be some time before Oi'm afloat again. Now, Oi know that yez are anxious to continue the journey, and it isn't right that yez and the others should be kept here by me illness."

I assured him in the most positive manner that neither I nor Chips nor Jim Smith had the least desire to leave him behind, and that we were quite willing to wait until he was better, no matter who long it might be. Against this, however, he ventured a very firm protest, saying that the anxiety he would feel on our account, knowing that it was he who was

detaining us, would retard his progress towards recovery. Besides, he added—

"Yez couldn't lave me in better hands. Bedad, that little woman is just an angel, so she is, barring the wings, and she'll pull me through this business, and when the repairs are finished, and Oi'm out of dock again, Oi promise yez that we'll come after yez. Now, then, will that do for yez, me boy?"

I told him that there might be considerable difficulty in his doing that, inasmuch as we ourselves did not know where we were going to, and that for him to hope to find us in such a trackless wilderness would be like hoping for the impossible. Besides, as I pointed out to him, it would neither be safe nor prudent for him and Nausiscaa to trust themselves without companions to the perils of the unknown forest, and no less would it be unfair to take any of the men from the good father's little community, already so fearfully weakened by loss during the battle with the Jívaros bravos. My argument carried weight, and made the poor fellow very miserable; and after pondering over the matter for some time he cried out—

"By the Holy Moses, but Oi'll go wid yez as Oi am!"

I told him that that was utterly out of the question, and that not one of us would allow him to risk his

life in any such way. But he seemed so determined that one of two things should be done, either that we should start without him or with him, that I consented to take counsel with Nausiscaa and our friends. Accordingly I got the carpenter, Jim Smith, Nausiscaa, and the priest together. I felt in honour bound to take the priest into our confidence, and to solicit his advice, even though we did not adopt it.

As I anticipated that he would do, he again set his face resolutely against our continuing what he described "as a mad and Quixotic journey," which would probably cost us all our lives, as it had done Peter Duncumbe's party.

"But, good father," I argued, "we are not seeking for that which does not exist. We know, or, at any rate, there is very strong evidence to that effect, that this valley of gold is a substantial reality."

"And what of that?" he exclaimed a little sternly. "What are millions of pounds' worth of gold to you, if you are to forfeit your lives in trying to get at it?"

"Nothing; father," I answer firmly, "if we really knew that our lives were to be sacrificed; but men who strive for this world's prizes do so in the hope that if they secure them they may be spared to enjoy them."

The good old man made this the text for a dis-

sertation on the uselessness and vanity of worldly wealth and station, to which we listened with the reverence and respect due to one of his learning and calling; but I fear the seed he tried to sow fell upon very stony ground, and he saw that, for he exclaimed—

"Wilful men must have their way, and if you are determined to pursue a phantom that may lead you to destruction, well, all, I've got to say is, Go. At any rate, you will take my blessings and goodwill with you. But, though you go yourselves, this dear child"—meaning Nausiscaa—"shall be exposed to no more danger and risk."

The "dear child" smiled with that smile of calm assurance and self-conscious dignity that was peculiar to her, and, drawing herself up proudly until she looked like a grand Juno about to pronounce some solemn edict, she said—

"Father, your kind consideration for me stirs me to the heart, but you forget that I am a free subject; that I have a will of my own; and that I am in my native wilds. He who is my lover, and whose wife I am to become, will guide me in my course. If he says go, I go. If he says stop, I stop. But, whichever it be, neither the forests, the rivers, nor the mountains have terrors for me."

This little speech, which so strongly indicated the

beautiful girl's dauntless courage and devotion, aroused us to enthusiasm, so that we broke into a lusty cheer, which brought the blushes of modesty into her face, and the priest seeing how determined she was, made answer—

"As you will, daughter. But remember that your fate is in your own hands. Have a care how you make or mar it."

We all saw that to prolong the discussion would be a useless waste of time, and as it was Nausiscaa's wish that we should not remain, I talked the matter over with Chips and Smith, and the result was we decided to push on, and continue our search for the wonderful valley. We went to the hut where Barney was lying, and made known our decision to him, but we told him that there was a condition attached to our going away, and only on that condition being strictly observed would we consent to go. The condition was that he was not to stir from the village till he got a message from us."

"Oi'll agree to that," he said, "wid a condition of me own. If Oi don't hear from yez in six weeks' time, Oi'll start off after yez."

As we had no doubt that something definite would have happened within six weeks, and that we should be able to communicate with him by means of an

Indian—a single Indian bent on a particular journey will travel through the forest with great rapidity, and will support himself for days together on a handful of mashka and a little cassava root—we resolved to send back word whether we found the valley, or not.

This point being agreed to and decided upon, we at once set to work to make preparations for the continuation of our adventurous journey. Our Indians, unfortunately, had been reduced to twelve, the rest having been killed in the fight with the savages. Every one of these men was perfectly willing to go on with us, and as we should still be fifteen in all—three white men and twelve Indians—I had every confidence in the success of our mission. We had plenty of guns and ammunition and other arms, besides considerable quantities of the stores and goods provided by poor Yasotoaró. We got six mules from the village to carry our baggage, and we also provided ourselves with about a hundred fathoms of rope made from the lianas and with a light canoe that could be carried on a man's head or a mule's back.

It thus seemed as if we were guarded against almost any contingency likely to happen. And so, all being ready, we fixed a day for our departure. The leavetaking was solemn and affecting. The dear, good father turned all his little flock out, and made

them kneel and sing a most beautiful hymn in their simple and expressive language. Then he told them to pray for our safety, and so earnestly did they do this that we were all deeply moved.

It was a touching scene—grand in its very simplicity, and so full of earnestness and pathos that it was like the realization of some heroic poem. These simple Indians, who had been reclaimed from darkness and ignorance by the self-abnegation and devotion of a Jesuit father, prayed with most impressive earnestness in the midst of their wilderness that Heaven would shield us from peril as we pursued our journey into the unknown. Nature in her grandeur and beauty was around us—grandeur and beauty of such a superlative order that no pen could do anything like justice to it. But the grandest thing of all was the sublime faith of those poor natives as they poured out their supplications to the great God of all men, black and white alike.

And now the supreme moment came for our parting. Barney, who was still very weak and ill, was brought out on his bed, and Nausiscaa sat beside him. We pressed their hands and muttered our farewells in tremulous voices. Then we tore ourselves away, and, with Godspeed cheers of our friends ringing in our ears, we set out once more in search of El Dorado.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE GRIP OF A PYTHON.

For several days we continued our journey without any special adventure. The character of the country was much the same as that through which we had already passed. Interminable forests, in which the rank and luxuriant vegetation excited our wonder. The tall trees struggled up towards the sun, the upper branches forming an interlaced canopy of such remarkable density that only stray rays of light filtered through, and thus all below was in a perpetual twilight. Round the trunks of the trees grew parasites of extraordinary variety, and orchids of most marvellous colours and beauty of form flashed out between the deeper greens. The ground was a soft, spongy carpet of decaying vegetable matter, the accumulations of countless ages, and the haunt of almost every conceivable species of vermin, reptile, and insect; in fact, the animal life was no less varied and astonishing than the floral.

Through this primitive wilderness we could only make our way with difficulty, and at all times we had to be on the alert against the noxious things that crept, and crawled, and ran. We had to cross many rivers and streams, and here our portable canoe proved invaluable. All these rivers were the haunts of crocodiles and alligators, some of them of monstrous size. There were strange aquatic birds too, many of them suggestive in their grotesqueness of the distorted visions of a dream. One creature in particular struck us as truly remarkable. He had legs about six feet long, and so thin and straight that they resembled stilts. His body in shape approximated somewhat closely to a beer barrel. It was of a dull, uniform grey, save the tips of the wings, which were bright yellow, with a little splash of glittering green. Round his neck he wore a brilliant, flaming scarlet collar. His head was not unlike a pig's in shape, while he had large goggle eyes that gave him a stupid and unintelligent appearance. When this strange bird stretched his wings they measured at least fifteen feet from tip to tip. In his flight he seldom rose above the tree tops. His legs were stretched out to their fullest extent behind him, his neck was craned forward, he uttered a peculiar gluck, gluck, and his wings beat the air like the sails of a windmill.

He alighted always with a great thud, and for some little time after continued to gluck with a deep, bass, guttural sound, until at last he settled into a motionless and statue-like attitude. The Indians told us that these birds lived upon the reptiles and insects that infested the swamps, and that they were possessed of prodigious strength, which enabled them to cope with the largest reptile the forest contained. Fights between the birds and huge serpents were very common; but the bird, which seemed to be impervious to snake poison, invariably conquered by beating his enemy to death with his powerful stilt-like legs. He would then gluck triumphantly for many minutes previous to gobbling his foe up. The natives called the bird the *Quari rumno*, which I thought exceedingly appropriate, for he was about the queerest and rummest creature I've ever looked upon. One day I was tempted to shoot a specimen, and bowled an unusually large fellow over by putting a bullet through his brain. On examining him I found that he so swarmed with hideous vermin as to be repulsive in the highest degree, and so I left him where he fell as a feast for the birds of prey that soon began to gather about him. Soon after this I was the actor in a most strange and startling adventure that came well nigh costing me my life.

One morning, before we broke up our camp to continue our journey, I took my gun and machete and went off into the forest alone, to try and shoot something that we could make a meal of. Being hot and tired, I sat down on what I supposed to be the trunk of a fallen and decayed tree that was half buried in the rank undergrowth. I put my gun out of my hand, with the barrel resting against the trunk of the tree, and, having removed my hat, I was wiping my perspiring forehead, when suddenly to my amazement and alarm the trunk moved. I sprang to my feet, and judge my feelings when I saw that I had been sitting on the back of a huge python. His movement had caused the gun to fall to the ground, and before I could snatch it up the reptile lashed out, and with lightning-like movement he threw a coil around my body, thus imprisoning me in his hideous embrace.

I had on many previous occasions in the course of my adventurous career been brought face to face with death, and I would venture to say with all due modesty that I am not conscious of ever having quailed or felt any actual fear. But now I must confess that a sense of sickening despair came upon me as I found myself in the grasp of the formidable snake whose strength was so astounding that if once

he got his coils around even the most powerful brute that roamed the forest he could crush him into a shapeless mass. Now, although I was a well-formed and powerful man, my power was but that of a puny infant when compared with a lion's or a tiger's, and if these animals were helpless in the grip of the terrible python, how much more so was I. The reader may therefore realize to some extent the mental agony I endured as I realized the situation with that rapidity peculiar to such a supreme moment. Let me say, however, in common fairness to myself, that although I quite believed my end had come, and that I should disappear for ever from mortal sight, no paralyzing terror deprived me of the power of thought or will; but, unfortunately, the coil that encircled me confined my arms to my side, so that I was unable to draw my machete. Having secured me in the way I have said, the hideous reptile raised his head in front of my face, so that I felt his hot and repulsive breath on my cheek. He moved his head backwards and forwards, as if trying to fascinate me, and his forked tongue darted in and out with amazing rapidity. Then his fold gradually tightened until a horrible sense of fascination seized me, and I heard the bones of my chest crack. The pain thus caused was excruciating. It seemed as if red hot

wires were running into my body, and that my nerves were being forcibly dragged out with pincers.

At this moment I most certainly never expected to hear the sound of human voice again, for it seemed beyond all doubt that the hour of my dissolution had come. But then it occurred to me—why I really cannot tell—to throw myself forward so that I fell to the ground. This sudden movement caused the reptile to relax his grip a little, so that my arms were freed, and quick as thought I drew my machete. The brute's head was raised from the ground, and within three feet of my face. With a wild and rapid sweep I struck his neck with the knife, and so far severed the head that it was only held by a strip of skin. In the reptile's dying throes the powerful muscles contracted, and the pressure they exerted on my body was so enormous that I felt the blood surge up to my head with a horrible rush, and I could see nothing, while the breath left my body. I became insensible, and must have remained so for some time. When my senses returned, and I opened my eyes, I was so dazed that I could not make out where I was nor what had happened. I was in no actual pain then, but I seemed to be oppressed with a peculiar sense of weariness, and as if I could not muster up sufficient resolution to make the exertion to move.

Another blank occurred. Perhaps I fell asleep or fainted again. How long I remained in that condition I know not, but my next experience was a sense of torturing pain in the whole of my body. But now my senses were clear, and I realized what had taken place. I raised my head, and saw that I was still enveloped in the folds of the reptile, though there was no pressure now beyond the actual weight, for the repulsive creature was dead. With some difficulty, and not without great pain, I dragged myself free, and managed to struggle to my feet, but then I reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and the forest seemed to be whirling round and round my head. I could not help a shudder as I contemplated the body of my dead foe, which, I estimated, measured nearly twenty feet in length. I saw my gun lying on the ground, so I snatched it up and fired it off, hoping to attract the attention of my companions. I must then have fallen down again and become insensible once more. But it appears that the report of the gun had reached the ears of my companions, and as I had been absent a considerable time, so that my friends had grown uneasy, they at once instituted a search when they heard the gun, and the Indians, with their marvellous instinct, took up my trail and followed it to where they found me lying. The dead snake at

once indicated what had occurred, and the Indians proceeded to make an examination of me, but found that no bones were broken, although I had been squeezed pretty hard, and was black and blue with the pressure. How I escaped having my chest crushed in is a miracle, but it is certain that, but for the lucky chance that enabled me to draw my machete and sever the python's head, I should have been killed.

It took me three or four days to recover from the effects of my strange encounter, and during that time we could not proceed, for naturally my friends would not go on without me. But at last I got all right, and we once more started on our journey.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EUREKA!

About a fortnight later we came one evening to the banks of a great river, which our Indians declared to be the Ica. We were almost wild with excitement, for it seemed now as if we were drawing near the goal for which we had suffered so much and struggled so long. It will be remembered that in the paper of Peter Duncumbe's that I had found on the raft he had written as a guide for finding the marvellous valley the following particulars:—"You land at the pillars near the Bear's Head. South half a furlong. North to Quito. East and by south. Cross the Ica, Cotopaxi bearing due west. A furlong north. Strike Coqueta, following south and east. At the fork towards the rising sun." At the word "sun" the note had suddenly ended, and what else Peter Duncumbe would have written had he not been seized with delirium was left to the imagination.

Now, so far we had carefully followed the instructions, though it is pretty clear that Peter Duncumbe and his party could not have had such a bitter experience in Quito that we had had, or he would not have written words that he must have known would be likely to induce other people to go there. It is no less certain that he did not touch that place when he returned to the coast.

Now, after long, long weeks of toil and danger, we stood on the banks of the Ica. It was a broad stream flowing with a rapid current almost due south from the point where we stood. The banks were lined with dense forests, and festoons of lianas and other trailing plants hung from the trees and trailed in the water, forming the most beautiful and picturesque effects. The animal life that abounded was astounding, or would have been so had we been less used than we were to these magnificent and wonderful forests.

On every patch of mud on the river banks the crocodiles, some of them of gigantic proportions, sunned themselves. Monkeys filled the air with their chattering, and tens of thousands of the most gorgeously plumaged birds flashed in the sunlight like winged jewels. The roar of the pumas and the tigers mingled with the other cries, while reptiles of all kinds swarmed. So numerous were they that by

means of long sticks which the Indians cut in the forest we killed hundreds of them, and tossed them into the river, where they were seized upon by the ravenous fishes.

Daylight had no sooner broken on the following morning than we were astir, for we were all eager to push forward and discover the valley of fabulous wealth of which we had dreamed for months. We crossed the river without difficulty by means of our small canoe, and, following Peter Duncumbe's directions, we set our faces north, where at the distance of a furlong we hoped to strike the Coqueta River, which is much smaller than the Ica, and practically a branch of that river.

The intervening space of country through which we were now travelling was covered with such dense undergrowth as to make progress extremely slow and laborious. We tried to discover a track, but there was not the sign of one; in fact, it seemed as if that primitive solitude had never before been invaded by man. So difficult was it to proceed that it was long past noon before we had accomplished half the furlong of distance that was to bring us to the Coqueta. We had suddenly come upon an open space with a swamp, in which was a glittering pool of water, where we beheld a strange sight. A beautiful ante-

lope or gazelle was drinking, and in a tuft of long marsh grass a few paces off crouched, ready to spring, a magnificent tiger. The picture was a remarkable one, for it was full of that grace of action and poetry of motion such as only Nature can give. It was strange, too, to reflect that here, in this remote tropical solitude, the universal law of Nature was being carried out—that the strong should prey upon the weak. Destruction of that greatest of God's gifts —life—which once being taken can never be restored, seems to be an ordained decree, and applicable to all living things, from man, which is the highest, to the most noxious vermin, which are the lowest. Everything that walks the earth, that creeps or crawls on the ground, that swims in the waters, or that flies in the air, has its enemies that are for ever seeking to encompass its death.

Of course, I did not indulge in this moralizing at that supreme and exciting moment, when the wily and insidious tiger, with noiseless and silky motion, was gathering up its supple body for the mighty spring that should bring down the pretty animal, which, all unconscious of its terrible danger, was slaking its thirst in the pool. We were all, indeed, more practical, and while the mouths of us white men watered at the prospect of supping off that sweet

gazelle, the Indians were moved by similar gastronomic sensations with regard to the tiger, for the natives of these wilds regard tiger-flesh as a most toothsome luxury, and they will with avidity drink the hot blood of a tiger, under the impression that it imparts to them some of the tiger's strength and boldness. What we did was this, we rapidly covered both animals with our guns and fired. The gazelle leapt into the air, and fell dead, pierced by several bullets, and the tiger sprang forward and rolled over. But he jumped to his feet again instantly, and gave vent to a mighty roar that startled the life of the whole forests, so that birds clamoured and chattered, and monkeys squealed with affright, and leapt excitedly from tree to tree. Even some of the lazy crocodiles raised their heads, opened their ponderous jaws, and snapped at the air in their excitement. For a few moments the wounded beast stood a model of foaming and concentrated rage. Roar after roar resounded from his deep throat, he lashed himself furiously with his tail, and his eyes were like glowing balls of fire. Pain and rage combined to make him terrible as a foe, and at last spying us, he gave one tremendous bound and was in our midst, scattering us like chaff before the wind. In his leap, he struck one of our poor Indians and literally scalped him,

bowling the man over, and with one awful crunch of his powerful jaws he crushed the poor fellow's head into a shapeless mass. Recovering our presence of mind, we poured another volley into the infuriated beast and stretched him dead. But, alas! he had had his revenge, and our brave companion, although still breathing, was hopelessly injured. It was terrible, indeed, to behold him, and to think that the mischief had been wrought in so brief a space of time. It was a melancholy satisfaction to know that as the brain had been mangled all consciousness had fled. His brother Indians, recognizing that nothing could be done, squatted in a circle around him, and began a most pathetic and wailing chant that was singularly affecting. Ten minutes later the injured man was dead.

As soon as their companion had breathed his last, the Indians proceeded to perform certain ceremonies, including a death dance, as they call it. That over, they skinned the tiger with great skill and ability, and all the time they poured forth volleys of abuse on the dead animal. They then wrapped the dead man in the skin, together with his spear, his body-guard, and his machete. They also put in a portion of food, and some leaves of a palm, which I understand was to symbolize that the dead man had

triumphed over death. They next proceeded to dig a grave in the soft ground, and therein placed the man who so short a time ago had been as full of life and as active as any of us. I am quite sure that we all mourned the poor fellow most sincerely, and the untoward accident served to remind us with what startling suddenness one might meet his death in these wilds.

The ceremony of burial over, our next care was to skin the deer and appropriate the best parts of its flesh, and as the day was so far advanced we decided to camp where we were for the night, and having made a huge fire, we soon had a quantity of deer steaks broiling. The Indians preferred portions of the tiger's flesh, and they gorged themselves to such an extent that I thought they must surely all be seized with apoplexy. However, no evil results followed their inordinate meal, and they slept soundly all night, and awoke in the morning like giants refreshed. As we resumed our march the sky was black with heavy clouds, and soon one of those terrific storms broke which are peculiar to these tropical regions. We hastily extemporized shelters of palm-branches as protection from the deluge of rain. The storm lasted for two hours, and when we were able to go forward again the soaking and steaming forest made travelling very unpleasant.

An hour later we came upon the Coqueta River, and thus another stage in our strange journey was completed. The Coqueta is a narrow stream, but now it was much swollen with the rain, and it roared along with hoarse fury. According to the directions of Duncumbe we had now to follow this river in its course south and east, for in its many windings it went either south or east, "towards the rising sun." All that day we continued going, but when night came we saw no signs of any fork. The character of the country, however, had changed; it had become rocky and broken, and the vegetation was sparse. That night we encamped in a rocky hollow, and all night long we had the hoarse roar of the river in our ears. This rocky feature of the country raised our hopes considerably, for it seemed to indicate that we were coming to a gold-bearing part of the country; in fact, when we examined some pieces of the rock we found distinct traces of gold.

Almost every step of our advance now served to increase our excitement, and we followed the tortuous river with intense eagerness. At last, when that day was well nigh spent, we reached a spot where the river forked; one branch going south, the other flowing due east.

It was with strange feelings we lay down to sleep

that night. For myself, I know that I slept but little, and I could not help tracing the sinuous course of my life during the last few months, to that moment when we first sighted the raft in the Pacific to now, when we had reached the very spot indicated by Peter Duncumbe in so few words. Here, indeed, was the fork of the Coqueta, and from hence we must go towards the rising sun.

The day had scarcely broken when we were once more afoot. We were in a fever of excitement, as we believed that we were drawing near the valley of gold which Duncumbe had named El Dorado. It was instructive to reflect, too, on what our future might be. Should we really discover this valley of teeming wealth? Should we grow rich beyond the dreams of avarice, or, like him, meet with disaster and death?

The country through which we were travelling now was rocky and treeless, and we ascended rapidly, always following the course of the river, which, however, roared far below us in a stony and narrow bed. It was a toilsome journey, for huge boulders were scattered in our way, and there was nothing to afford us shelter from the sun that beat fiercely down, scorching us to the colour of mummies. Amongst the rocks, too, were swarms of snakes, scorpions, centipedes, gigantic spiders, and a most ugly-looking

lizard about half a foot long. It was quite black, with green eyes, and a yellow spot in the centre of its forehead between the eyes. The Indians told us that this little reptile was very deadly, its bite producing terrible frenzy, which speedily ended in death. Fortunately, it was very shy, and scuttled away on the slightest noise. It only bit when handled or inadvertently trodden upon by the naked feet of Indians. What caused us more concern, however, than these poisonous things that crawled were the countless myriads of mosquitoes. They swarmed so thickly that they literally darkened the air in places, and they drove us white men almost to madness with their ferocious stings. Fortunately, a defence from their annoyance was at hand, and known to our Indian friends. It consisted of a small herb that grew in the interstices of the rock. On being bruised the herb gave forth an acrid and pungent juice, with a peculiar and almost sickening odour. This juice, smeared on the exposed parts of the body, prevented the mosquitoes from attacking us, and, although the odour was disgusting, it was more endurable than the stings of the ferocious little insects. We continued to toil upward for many hours, always with our faces to the east. At last we reached the culminating ridge of the declivitous slope, and then there burst

from us a simultaneous cry of joy, a cry that might have been interpreted as Eureka, for at our feet stretched a narrow valley, and we instinctively felt that we were gazing at last on the long-sought-for valley of gold.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MAD CARPENTER AND THE TRAGEDY OF EL DORADO.

For men to remain calm and cool under such circumstances would be contrary to human nature. The experience and dangers we had gone through were for the present over as it seemed, and our goal was before us. Is it to be wondered at, therefore, that we lost our heads a little, and with a wild cry rushed helter-skelter, pell-mell down the hill-side into the valley. We saw at once unmistakable evidence of men having been at work, for there were large holes, and heaps of earth and stones beside them. A glance was sufficient evidence to show us that the precious metal was there in bewildering profusion. Wherever there was a stone visible it was literally yellow with gold. If one kicked the loose earth with one's foot, handfuls of pure gold were exposed. There were nuggets strewn about from the size of peas to duck's eggs. At the sight of all this fabulous wealth, of

these millions and millions and millions of pounds' worth of the precious dross, for which men sell their very souls, I think we all became delirious with excitement, and we scrambled as children scramble for sweets. We bowled each other over in our wild careering, and grabbed gold from each other's hands. In less than half an hour we had filled our pockets, our handkerchiefs, everything in fact, and within that brief space of time each man had on his person a fortune that would have kept him in luxury for the rest of his days. Truly we had found El Dorado; and equally true it was that the valley was a valley of gold. It was perhaps the most marvellous sight that human eyes could behold. Indeed, it is given to few men to see at a glance millions of pounds' worth of gold lying scattered around him on the ground. There were literally ship-loads of it, and nobody was there, so far as we could see, to stop us from gathering just as much as ever we wanted. That valley, which was not more than five miles long by a mile broad, contained perhaps more gold than the world had ever yet produced.

When the first wild burst of excitement had passed, we began to sober down, and to feel ashamed of having made such fools of ourselves; for it was too obvious that there was not the slightest need for

scrambling, for a man could sit down promiscuously on the ground, and within the radius that a sweep of his arms could describe he would have tons of the yellow dross. The whole valley, in fact, was one great mass of pure gold. We looked at each other in blank astonishment, and then sheepishly we all, with one exception, began to empty out our pockets again, for we were weighted down. The exception was the carpenter. He was acting like a madman, rushing about from spot to spot, picking the gold up and stuffing it into his pockets, his shirt, his cap, and even into his mouth. I spoke to him, but in reply he uttered the most frightful yells and screams, and glared at me like a wolf, and then suddenly he sprang at me and knocked me down, and, lifting a ponderous piece of quartz that was at least two-thirds gold, he was about to dash it on my head when Jim Smith and an Indian seized him. But, with an unearthly screech, he broke away, and in a hoarse, strident voice exclaimed—

"It is all mine, all mine. You shall tak nane o' it frae me; you are thieves and robbers; gang awa, and leave me to my ain."

It was only too obvious that poor Chips' brain had turned at the sight of the untold hoards of wealth, and that he was raving mad. I had sprung to my

feet, and, with the aid of Jim Smith and the Indian, I tried to secure the unfortunate carpenter, thinking that by talking to him I could pacify him. But, with a dreadful imprecation, he turned and fled up the hill-side to a spot where we had left our mules, baggage, ammunition, and guns. Then we began to realize that, though we had discovered El Dorado, the countless tons of gold that were lying at our feet were practically useless, and that none of us might ever live to reach the coast again. The fearful hardships and dangers we had endured in order to find this place would all have to be gone through again on our return. And, after all, we could not take away more than a limited quantity of the boundless wealth that Nature in some strange freak had heaped up in this remote wilderness, so far removed from all civilization and means of transport.

In our eagerness to reach the bottom of the valley as soon as we had sighted it, we had left the mules and baggage on the ridge from whence we had first got a glimpse of this marvellous golden region. On turning to the spot, we were surprised to observe that the carpenter was making a barricade of some of the baggage, and that he was piling up the bags containing the ammunition inside his improvised fort.

I don't know how it was that I should have come

to the conclusion, but instantly it occurred to me that this man, whose brain had so suddenly given way, meant mischief, and in his madness he intended to try and kill us all, under the insane impression that he would then have all the gold to himself.

"Mates," I called out to my companions, "we must secure Chips at all costs."

These words caused the men to realize the situation for the first time, and a rush was made for the spot where the carpenter had posted himself, but we were met by a fusillade, and four of the Indians bit the dust, while a bullet grazed Jim Smith's shoulder.

We fell back in dismay at this horrible act of treachery, due, it is true, to madness. It must be remembered that from our position we were all exposed, for there was no shelter, not a tree or a shrub. The carpenter was on a ridge above us, and about a hundred and fifty yards away. He had possessed himself of all the spare firearms, numbering nearly two dozen guns, and the ammunition. He had piled up the baggage so as to form a breastwork, and consequently was protected. At the sound of the firing, the mule which was laden with our spare provisions bolted, and was quickly followed by the others, with the exception of two, and we saw them disappear behind the ridge.

The situation was truly desperate and awful, for the advantages were all on the side of the maniac, who rent the air with the most horrible and unearthly shrieks and laughter. Four of our brave and faithful Indians were stretched on the ground. Two were motionless and apparently dead; the other two were mortally wounded.

For some moments we stood paralysed with horror at this cruel disaster, and I could not help thinking of the words of the good priest at the village when he saw we were determined to continue our journey in search of El Dorado. "What," said he, "are millions of pounds' worth of gold to you if you are to forfeit your lives in trying to get at it?" It was a hard truth to have to realize, but I did recognize it, that though we stood upon gold it would not save us from starvation, nor ward off the bullets of the madman on the ridge. However, it was no time for moralizing or reflection. Something must be done. And the very first thing was to rescue our wounded comrades.

"Boys," I called out, "we must make a rush, and rescue those two wounded men, or they may bleed to death."

No other word was necessary. We made a simultaneous rush, and examined the fallen men. Two of them were dead, as I feared; the other was

at his last gasp; and the fourth, it was plain to see, was desperately wounded. We lifted up the poor fellows, but before we could bear them out of range the madman fired again, and a fifth of our comrades went down with a bullet clean through him. He fell on his face, and never moved again.

Thus, within half an hour of our having reached the goal that we had suffered and struggled for so much, three of our faithful comrades were dead, and two were in the throes of death, while my only other white companion was wounded. There could be no doubt that for the time being the mad carpenter was master of the situation. We were literally trapped, and, as he had plenty of guns, plenty of ammunition, and was a good shot, and, moreover, was protected by his breastwork, which, with the cunning of madness, he had constructed, we were in a measure at his mercy. The only thing we could do was to get out of range of his guns, and this we did as quickly as possible. Then we found that one of the two men we had brought off the field was dead, and the other was dying; in fact, he breathed his last within five minutes. This wholesale slaughter appalled us, and we felt that something must be done. I therefore took counsel with the survivors, and we unanimously resolved that there was no alternative but to try and

shoot the carpenter down. I and Smith had our muskets, and one of the Indians also had a musket. The others had bodoqueras, but some of these had been dropped in the excitement that the sight of the enormous masses of gold had caused. Smith, who in spite of his wound was able to use his gun, was desperate. Usually a very quiet and reserved man, he was almost beside himself now with rage, as he contemplated the destruction the madman had wrought in such a brief space of time. Clenching his teeth, and raising his hand to heaven, he hissed—

"The blood of our five friends is crying out for vengeance, and that madman on the ridge must be shot down. Let us spread ourselves out and advance quickly upon him, and thus outmanœuvre him."

This seemed to be the only feasible plan, and so, forming in open file, we three with the muskets taking the lead, we moved towards the ridge. As soon as we got within range Chips exposed himself, and we fired simultaneously, but unhappily missed, and we saw another of the poor Indians fall, shot in the head by the carpenter. It seemed as if the lunatic took a special delight in potting the poor natives, and as if he was desirous of sparing us who had been his shipmates. It is true he had wounded Smith, but that probably had been accidentally done.

"Mate," said I to Smith, "we will not risk the lives of any more of our friends. Let the task be ours; we will separate here. You go to the east, I to the west, and then we will bear down upon the murderer from two diametrically opposite points. One of us will be certain then to pot him."

"Yes, if he doesn't pot us in the mean time; but your plan is a good one."

Telling the Indians to keep out of range, Smith and I separated, and when we had walked about three hundred paces from each other we faced about and mounted on to the crest of the hill, thus being on the same level as our foe. We now commenced to advance towards him. He realized our manœuvre at once, and kept himself well sheltered. Steadily we both advanced, keeping our guns at the ready, but suddenly from the madman's improvised fort a tongue of flame leapt out, and I saw poor Smith pitch forward and fall headlong down the hill-side. This was too much for me. My blood boiled, and I rushed towards the carpenter. Twice he fired, but I must have borne a charmed life, for though the bullets whizzed past me I was not grazed. As he had evidently exhausted his guns, and had not time to reload, Chips bolted from his defences, and ran as hard as he could go; but I knelt down, took deliberate

aim, and fired. My bullet found its billet in his body, for he threw up his arms, and fell backwards.

I ran to him. He was evidently dying, but was conscious. He passed his hand over his eyes, as if trying to clear away a haze. Then he murmured feebly—

"What does it mean? I've been dreaming."

He closed his eyes, and was silent for a few moments. I knelt down and put my hand on his pulse, but could not detect its beats. He opened his eyes again, but they were glazing and had a far-away look in them. He was muttering some words, and I bent my ear to catch them, and this is what I heard—

"Gold, blood, blood and gold. I'm confused. Something is wrong. Blood and gold. It is ever so. Men will slay their best friends for gold. It is accursed; doubly and trebly accursed."

He gave a great sigh, partly raised himself on his elbow, contorted his body in his death agony, then uttered a moaning cry, and fell back again dead.

At that moment I felt myself as if I was the victim of some hideous nightmare, and actually rubbed my eyes to assure myself that I was awake. But it was no dream. It was all a horrid reality. The dead carpenter was at my feet, and yards away, at the foot of the ridge, was poor Smith lying in stony stillness, for he too was dead.

It was an awful tragedy; possibly almost unparalleled in its startling and unforeseen suddenness. I was the sole white survivor of the ill-fated expedition, and out of the twelve friendly Indians only five remained. I felt bewildered, dazed, stunned. I actually saw masses of yellow gold glittering in the burning sunlight, but its fascination for me had gone now, and I felt utterly indifferent to it. The old priest was right. What was the use of untold millions, if a man was to sacrifice his life?

When I had recovered my scattered senses, I took counsel with the survivors, and we decided that the first thing to be done was to go in search of the mules which carried our stores, but our search proved fruitless, and we had to recognize the terrible fact that starvation was staring us in the face.

And now we had a solemn duty to perform to our dead foe and friends alike. We buried the carpenter by himself on the ridge. Poor Smith we interred at the bottom of the valley, and literally in a bed of gold, and as I saw his face covered up for ever I shed tears. The Indians we buried a little further off, and side by side, and then, our labours ended, we made our camp fire, but the shadow of the dark tragedy environed us, and we felt utterly depressed and lonely. For myself, I was sick at heart, and miserable beyond

the power of words to describe. It was indeed an awful ending to our adventurous journey, nor had the end come yet, so far as we could see, for we had the dangers of the return journey to face, even if we did not all perish in that remote wilderness. No wonder, therefore, that we were depressed, and felt that the gold had truly proved a curse. And not all the immense masses that lay there, as they had lain there for hundreds of thousands of years, could bring our dead comrades back to life.

Throughout that sad and dreary night I lay and reflected on our position, and the conclusion was irresistibly forced upon me that our proper and only course was to retrace our steps with all speed. For what could we do? We had no means of transport for any large quantity of the gold. Two of the mules remained, and we might load them with a limited amount. They could not carry any great weight, on account of the difficulty of travelling.

My views were shared by the Indians, and so we determined to lose no time in putting the plan into execution. We extracted a quantity of the gold and loaded it on the mules' backs. Then we tied as much as we could comfortably bear around our bodies, and all being ready, we turned our backs upon the blood-stained Valley of Gold.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

The misfortunes that had overtaken us did not leave us when we turned away from the desolate El Dorado. It might really have been called the Valley of Death. The fourth day out, in crossing a swamp, one of the mules got bogged, and, in spite of all our efforts, we could not rescue him, and he gradually sank out of sight with his precious burden. On the following day, our food supply being entirely exhausted, we made a camp fire, tethered the remaining mule to a tree, left an Indian on guard, and I and the others started off to hunt for game. We were away for many hours, and got separated in the forest, and when we reassembled later on at the camp one of the Indians was missing. The night came, but he had not returned, and the next morning we went out in search of him, but all without avail. We could find no trace of him, and his fate remained a mystery.

Probably he was bitten by a snake, crushed by a boa constrictor, or slain by a wild animal. With a vague hope that he might still turn up, we rested there the whole of the next day, but he came not, and sorrowfully we continued our journey; and our lessened numbers were a sad commentary on the extraordinary dangers of the journey.

For many days we continued on our way, but so sadly depressed were we that we talked but little. For our food supply we were entirely dependent on our guns and bodoqueras, but the Indians were expert hunters, and we had plenty to eat of a kind.

For myself I know that the hardships and mental shocks I had suffered had told upon me, and my spirits seemed to be crushed. A low fever, too, had seized upon me, and was gradually undermining my strength, so that I began to seriously think that I was destined to lay my bones in the forest. However, the good fortune that had all along seemed to be mine did not entirely desert me; and though I was for a time gloomy and despondent and very ill, I was enabled to keep up and travel a certain distance every day. About a fortnight after we left the Valley of Gold we one day came upon the traces of a camp that had only recently been left, for the ashes of the fire were still hot. Who could be travelling in this

wild region? Whoever they were, they could not be far off, and though they might be foes, they might also be friends. I told the Indians, therefore, to take up the trail and follow it. This they did, and we found that it led in the direction from whence we had come. Being unencumbered, we were enabled to push ahead rapidly, but it was not until nightfall that our perseverance was rewarded with the glow of a camp fire. Carefully reconnoitring, our joy may be imagined when we discovered that those we had been tracking were none others than our good friends Barney Fagan and Nausiscaa, together with six Indians.

Our extraordinary meeting was the occasion for the most exuberant manifestations of joy. We had only escaped missing each other by the very merest chance; at least I call it chance, but surely it was destiny, and a kind destiny, too. Barney had quite recovered his health, and, not having heard from us, he, true to his word, came after us. He heard the story of our disasters with the most poignant regret. When he recovered a little from the shock that the news caused him, he said—

"Feldje, me boy, I forgot to introduce yez to me wife, Mrs. Nausiscaa Barney Fagan."

"Well," I exclaimed, as I took her dear hands and shook them heartily, and then shook his, "I sincerely

congratulate you, and wish you long life and every possible happiness. And so the good father spliced you at last?"

"Bedad, he did. We've been married three weeks. Oi wouldn't give him any peace till he had done the job, and we are now on our honeymoon tour; and moighty pleasant it is."

His lightness of heart and spirits affected me, and I laughed aloud at the ludicrous idea of his being on his honeymoon tour in such a wilderness. I thought that Nausiscaa looked more beautiful than ever, and she certainly was proud of her warm-hearted, honest Irish husband.

As there was now no longer any object in Barney and his dear little wife continuing their journey, we decided to push back as rapidly as we could for the little Christian settlement on the banks of the Bobonaza. And the next day, when we broke up our camp, and turned our faces westward again, I felt happier and lighter-hearted than I had done for some time, although I had left the Valley of Gold behind me. Of course my happiness was only relative, for I could not shut out the dread tragedy from my mind.

Without further adventures worth recording, we reached the settlement, where we were heartily welcomed. Barney and his wife had set out in search

of us in direct opposition to the good priest's wishes, who predicted that none of us would return alive from our Quixotic expedition, as he persisted in calling it.

Nor was he very far from proving a true prophet. When he heard of the fearful tragedy at the Valley of Gold, he was very sad, and made it a text on which to preach a homily on the vanity of worldly things.

In this peaceful settlement and with this good father I remained six months, recruiting my health and strength, and I verily believe that those six months were the happiest of my life. Nevertheless, I began to yearn for the old country, and when some traders passed through the village on their way to the coast I decided to accompany them; though no persuasion would prevail upon Barney and his wife to move. They said they had resolved to remain at the settlement. My parting from them and my other good friends was a terrible wrench, but it had to be made, and at last I was once more journeying towards the sea. I was in possession of a very considerable amount of gold, which I calculated would keep me comfortable for the rest of my days, even if I decided to be content with that. It was perhaps but a small reward for the tremendous privations, dangers, and hardships I had gone through: but I resolved that, as soon as I reached England, I would organize

a strong expedition and return to the Valley of Gold.

In due course we reached Guayaquil, at the head of the gulf of the same name. Here I was fortunate enough to get a berth in a trading schooner that was going southward down the coast; and as I saw the Ecuadorian land fading astern I drew a sigh of relief, for I was by no means sorry to sniff the salt sea air again, and look forward to the day when I should know the comforts of home. Subsequently I made my way to San Francisco with a special object; that object was to carry out the dying request of poor Peter Duncumbe. It will be remembered that in the dead man's pocket-book was the following passage:—

"I solemnly charge any one into whose hands this may come, if he be a Christian, on penalty, if he fail, of being for ever cursed, and dying the death of a mangy dog in a ditch, to send any valuables I may have about me, and half of the gold I have secured, if it is at all possible, to Mary Ellen Freemantle, 48, —— Street, San Francisco, together with a sealed letter that will be found in the pocket at the end of this book."

As regards the valuables of Peter Duncumbe I had none. The box of gold had been confiscated, and the small pieces of gold found in the tobacco-box had

been equally distributed amongst my mates, and had been used principally for buying our food. But the letter I had carefully, I may almost say sacredly, preserved, and as I did not wish to go empty handed to Miss Freemantle, I sold some of my gold, and putting up a tidy little sum in a box, I determined to tell the lady that Peter had sent it. Perhaps God will forgive me for the lie.

I had no difficulty in discovering Miss Freemantle, and I don't think I ever saw a more beautiful young woman. She had been Peter's sweetheart, and had for a long time been in a state of terrible suspense as to his fate. Now, as she learned the truth from me, she was overwhelmed with grief. I gave her the letter and the money, telling her that the latter had belonged to Peter. She could not find words wherewith to thank me, and she made me tell her the whole of the terrible story, from the time we discovered the dead body on the raft in the Pacific, to my reaching the coast again.

For some months I hung on in Frisco, and I suppose I had better make a clean breast of it, and state that my reason for staying there was, that I fell over head and ears in love with Mary Freemantle. One day, I plucked up courage to tell her this, and she staggered me by saying that if she had

had any intention of marrying there was no man on earth she would sooner have had than me; but she had made a vow to be true to Peter's memory and she would never marry. I don't know how it was, but the old world seemed to have grown grey for me after this, and I thought San Francisco the most hateful town I had ever been in. I had a kind of wish then that I had laid my bones in that lonely valley in Ecuador, where so many of my friends were sleeping. So despondent was I that I determined to clear out; and, as I was pretty tired of a sailor's life, I took my passage in a vessel that was going direct to London, which I duly reached without further adventure.*

* For reasons which he does not state, Mr. Feldje evidently saw reasons to change his mind in this respect, for it is pretty clear that he never went back to Ecuador. There is every reason for thinking that his little love affair in San Francisco considerably affected him, and perhaps soured his after-life. There is no doubt also that he must have brought away a large amount of the precious metal, and it is scarcely less probable that he found the comforts of London life, and unlimited supplies of rum and 'bacca, too strong to tear himself away from them, and run the risks and endure the hardships involved in another journey to El Dorado. Poor Feldje! Whatever his faults were he had a tender heart, and one cannot help wishing that Miss Freemantle had seen her way clear to bestow her hand upon him. Such a brave man and staunch companion could not have failed to make a good husband. However, we do not all get our deserts in this world, and we must resignedly accept our fate as it comes to us. Well may we say of Feldje, *Sit tibi terra levis.*—THE AUTHOR.

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